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and

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Michael Wilding

Arcadia

Find Me My Enemies
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First published 2022 by Arcadia
the general books' imprint of
Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd
7 Lt Lothian St Nth, North Melbourne, Victoria 3051
tel 03 9329 696 / *fax* 03 9329 5452
aspic@ozemail.com / www.scholarly.info
ISBN
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Cover design Amelia Walker

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Find Me My Enemies

To Riju Ramrakha

Chapter 1

The phone rang. Plant let it ring, as he usually did. The answering machine kicked in. ‘Please leave your message after the tone.’ No message. But the line stayed open, someone waiting for him to pick up. Plant waited for whoever it was to speak. Or whatever it was, these being the days of robotic devices. Whoever it was did not speak. Or whatever it was. And Plant did not answer. Presumably not a call-centre doing phone advertising, call-centres usually cut out straight away, saving the price of a call. Plant remained incurious. Tried to, anyway. In the end whoever or whatever it was at the other end gave up. ‘Thank you for calling,’ the answering machine declaimed politely.

It did it again. The phone. Plant disregarded it again, as he generally did. Half an hour later there was another call. ‘Please leave your message after the tone.’

‘Plant, pick up, are you there? Come on, crawl out from under the coffee table and pick up, will you.’

Plant picked up.

‘Hello?’ More a question than a greeting.

‘Freak,’ Fullalove said, ‘why don’t you answer?’

‘Why don’t you leave a message?’

‘What’s the point? Just to say I called?’

‘If you said who you were I might answer.’

‘And what if you didn’t?’

‘If I wasn’t there I could phone you back later.’

‘You can’t.’

‘What do you mean, I can’t?’

‘I’m in a phone box.’

‘Why?’

‘Why do you think? And don’t say it.’

‘My lips are sealed,’ Plant said, unsealing them to speak words of assurance.

‘Keep them that way.’

‘Nice to hear from you again,’ Plant said.

‘I need you,’ Fullalove said.

Did a warm glow of belonging spread through Plant's limbs? Did a sense of purposefulness overtake him? An intimate feeling of social participation, membership of the human family, the community of nations? Was he, after all, wanted and cherished and loved and needed? Really?

'You there?' Fullalove barked. 'Where've you gone?'

'Yes,' Plant said, 'still here.'

'Well come down here, mate. Soonest. I can put you up. I've got a job for you.'

'Where's here?' Plant asked. But Fullalove had hung up. Or run out of coins. To have used a credit card would have destroyed the whole point of using a phone box. Anonymity. Untraceability. Which was why Fullalove never used a credit card. Apart from the fact that the banks probably deemed him not to be creditworthy. And not only the banks.

For Fullalove to concede that he needed someone, something big must have happened. Or was impending. And presumably troublesome. Fullalove trusted no one. If he had needs, he concealed them. If he had social contacts, they were unlisted. Dealing with Fullalove was one on one. Plant could not recall encountering him in company with anyone else, unless they were people Plant was with. All dealings were on a need to know basis. Not that Fullalove was niggardly in dispensing knowledge you might need. Or even knowledge you might prefer not to know. He would generously relay details of current drone surveillance technology. Extension to internment without charge or trial legislation. Digital camera recognition of car registrations and its implications for unpaid fines or unrenewed insurance. Fullalove was not one afraid to hold forth. The brevity of his phone call spoke volumes.

Plant drove down the Pacific Highway towards Sydney. He had been away for a while. Quite a while. He had grown to love his rural solitude. It was a love that had brought an equability. Equanimity. One of those things. He had grown to love everything. He had found himself increasingly happy to see no one. It surprised him. Then it began to worry him. Which made him unhappy. So he accepted Fullalove's invitation. Not without doubt. He wasn't sure seeing people again would make him at all happy. Pretty certainly it could leave him depressed. But he could treat it as a scientific test. Let's see. All part of the rich tapestry of existence. All that detached acceptance. And a little frisson of excitement at returning to urban life. And that ambiguity in the

excitement, that inevitable doubt and anxiety about Fullalove and the squalor in which he lived. A test of anyone's detachment.

He drove carefully. Within the speed limit. Carrying a personal stash that might seem in excess of any reasonable personal need. But with Fullalove in prospect, any stash needed to be multiplied by a factor of two at least. He knew enough not to trust Fullalove's industrial strength hydroponic mutated and adulterated dope. Living in the country, up there, with only natural, organic grown in the soil and ripened on the stem product, the prospect of a city agro-business market economy source held no appeal.

Chapter 2

Plant drove to Newtown, on the assumption Fullalove was still living there and hadn't moved to an unlisted phone box. A phone box might have been an improvement on Fullalove's inner city hovel, a pokey, single-fronted, single-storied cottage. What little frontage there was of it was unobtrusive in a generally grimy somewhat gentrified street. Inside it was unrenovated, unrestored 1970s squalor, the walls lined with books, volumes of conspiracy theory and the politically incorrect, ash and newspapers and unwashed glasses and cups and the occasional plate scattered across every surface, the ceiling yellowed with smoke.

'Feel like a coffee?' Fullalove asked.

After an eleven hour drive Plant felt like nothing much at all. Except lying down on a bed and stretching out. The thought of coffee in those insalubrious cups was not appealing. He dodged the question.

'What's this job?' he asked.

'Let's go and get a coffee,' Fullalove said, his turn to dodge. 'Walls have ears.'

Which put paid to the idea of stretching out on a mattress, but also insured immunity from the cracked cups. They went out into the early evening and walked up to King Street.

'What's this job?' Plant asked again.

Fullalove looked round the cafe. The place was empty. He leaned forward in confidential mode.

‘I was talking to this bloke,’ he said. ‘Used to know him a bit, years ago, when I was starting out. He wants someone to check out stuff. Sounded right up your alley.’

‘What sort of stuff?’

‘Oh, you know, the usual.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh, track down his enemies.’

‘And then what?’

‘Tell him who they are. He’ll take care of the rest.’

Plant tried a stony look.

‘Only kidding,’ Fullalove said. ‘He’s not planning on killing them. At least, he didn’t say he was. Just wants to know why his career is fucked.’

‘What sort of career?’

‘Sort of writer. And knowing your literary interests, I thought, this sounds perfect for you.’

Plant pondered it. A sort of writer. Sort of journalist? Sort of novelist? What did it mean? Not a poet, surely. A journalist with aspirations? A novelist with a taste for a wider readership? Or a much skilled operator? Plant remained stony faced. His own literary interests had not borne that much fruit. A research degree. A bit of ghosting. And now this. Research assistance and investigative reporting, as it said on his card. A bit optimistic to call it a business card.

‘Who is he? What’s his name?’

‘James Slater.’

‘How does he know he’s got enemies?’

‘Everyone has enemies,’ Fullalove said.

‘And what do these enemies do?’

‘Thwart his career.’

‘Thwart his career?’

‘That’s what he said. Like I said, a literary sort of chap. Interesting vocabulary. A bit obsolescent, but there you are, that’s the way it is, the days of literature are fading fast.’

‘Is that so?’

‘So he says.’

Plant put his three sugars into his long black coffee. Despite the threat of late onset diabetes. Could three sugars be taken as a mark of poshness? Like three buttons on a jacket sleeve. But didn't the really posh suits have four buttons? Whatever, it was something those censorious places that only gave you one sugar needed to be told. Sugar helped take the burnt edge off the taste when they hadn't cleaned the lines of the coffee machine. Milk did the same, but the milk in most cafes tasted too milky or sour. He made a point of avoiding the optimistically named long-life stuff they probably irradiated and put in suppurating little plastic containers. Not good. Though such matters seemed not to worry Fullalove, immersed in his cappuccino.

'What sort of a writer is he?'

'You know, sort of novelist, sort of journalist.'

'Sort of pisspot?'

'In his time,' Fullalove agreed. 'Till he got into dope. But then, weren't we all? Till we got into dope.'

Plant shrugged. Self-incrimination was not his thing. Even if the cafe was empty and there was no one listening at the next table.

'What sort of journalism?' he asked.

'Well, you know, soft stuff mainly these days, entertainment, travel, book reviews. Just your average casual hack. A bit of features work in the silly season when the regulars take their summer holidays and no one's reading the papers. Not that they do any more, anyway. But back when I knew him people still believed in papers. Still bought them.'

'Even if they didn't read them.'

'Good for lighting fires.'

'Did he write much?'

'There were more papers around then. Not just the dailies but weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies. News magazines. Men's magazines. So he did a fair bit, sure. And he came across as sort of alternative. That old New Journalism stuff. Things were loosening up then. For a while. You know ...'

'So what's the story?'

'Well, he got delusions.'

'He wrote novels,' Plant offered.

‘Yeah, well, no, he did that, but that was cool, no one saw them, no one worried. At least it wasn’t poems. He was quite acceptable for a while. But he got journalistic delusions. Not just literary ones.’

‘What sort of delusions?’

‘Hr began writing about conspiracies. Like he was an investigative journalist,’ Fullalove said. He guffawed. Croaked. Like a happy frog.

‘And he wasn’t?’

‘Who was?’ Fullalove said. ‘He wasn’t the only one with that delusion. I stand before you.’

‘You’re sitting.’

Fullalove stood.

‘I need another coffee.’

Plant nodded.

‘I’ll get it,’ Fullalove offered. Soul of generosity. ‘You want another? I’ll get it. I’m already standing. Except I don’t have any money with me.’

‘Why am I not surprised,’ Plant said. Said rather than asked. It was not a question.

‘’Cause you’re world-weary and disillusioned.’

‘We all fell for that investigative journalism story,’ Fullalove said, bearing coffee and depositing the cups on the table. ‘A complete fantasy. All that Watergate nonsense. It was all leaked by the FBI. There wasn’t any investigating, this deputy director handed it over on a plate. It was a government job. An internal coup to get rid of Nixon. Bloodless. Nixon was afraid it was going to be a shoot out, military divisions moving to encircle the White House and seize him. He was ready for it. Could’ve been messy. So they decided to feed the shit to the press. Get rid of him that way. So no, forget investigative journalism. It’s a lie. It’s just an arm of the secret state. A cover story for leaks and disinformation.’

‘And Slater didn’t know this?’

‘Probably not then. No one knew it then. Maybe he knows it now. Maybe not. Who knows? How do you ever know for sure?’

Plant headed off a digression into ontology. If it was ontology. History, metaphysics, and now the theory of knowledge, Fullalove was always ready to hold forth. But Plant dragged him back.

'What happened?'

'What happened when?'

'With Slater.'

'He got political. Silly fucker.'

'Ah,' Plant said.

'He should've stuck to writing novels. Making it all up.'

'I thought you said he did.'

'Did what?'

'Wrote novels.'

'Yeah, well. I never read them. Life's too short as Dr Leavis said.'

'That was about reading *Tom Jones*.'

'All the same. You read one novel, you've read the lot.'

'Don't even need to read one,' Plant suggested.

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove agreed.

'Did he publish the political stuff?'

'For a while. He had a column for a while. But, you know, there's politics and politics. His were the wrong sort. So in the end, no, not the sort of stuff anyone would publish. Not in the free press of the free world.'

'So how do you know about it?'

Fullalove savoured his coffee.

'Know about what?'

'That he wasn't getting published.'

'I don't know. Someone must have told me.'

'Who?'

Fullalove shook his head. Flecks of cappuccino foam dropped to the table.

'Secrets of the confessional? Patient confidentiality? Early onset Alzheimer's?'

'Can't remember. Maybe I noticed he wasn't appearing. Or he could have told me himself. Back then people used to tell you stuff. Talk about what they were doing. You'd say you

were writing something or other and they'd say, hey man, did you know about this, this might be relevant, hey, have you checked out this source, you read this book? Now they just steal your ideas.'

'The days of co-operative endeavour are over,' Plant said.

'Till the revolution.'

'And when will that be?'

'Any day now, I'd reckon.'

'You've been saying that for years. Decades.'

'It's getting closer,' Fullalove said. 'Think positive.'

Chapter 3

Plant made a call to Slater. From a phone box, at Fullalove's insistence. They arranged to meet.

'What's your address?' Plant asked.

'It's meaningless,' Slater said.

Existential despair, Plant assumed. He welcomed it. It was the desperation that drove clients to employ his services. Don't knock it, weird as it might sound.

'I could give you one,' Slater said, 'but it would be no use. I'm on Scotland Island. There aren't any street signs. Or house numbers. Best I meet you. I'll see you at the Church Point ferry wharf.'

Maybe not despair, Plant reflected. Maybe helpfulness. Or obsessive compulsive disorder.

'How shall I know you?'

'I'll know you,' Slater said.

It took Plant the best part of an hour to get out of the city and over the harbour bridge and up the coast to Pittwater. He didn't need Fullalove to warn him of the downside of global positioning satellite technology. Plant was in the business of tracking others, not of being tracked himself. Nothing wrong with the traditional, printed street directory, as long as you could read a map. He found Church Point, parked his car in the car park at some expense, and walked down to the

wharf. There was a restaurant and motel, the Pasadena, with a shop and coffee cart on one side, and on the other side another coffee cart and a combined post office, general store and waterfront café, jutting out on piles into Pittwater. People sat there beneath shade umbrellas drinking coffees and having late breakfasts or early lunches, the ferry moored at the wharf, boats passing by and tying up, birds flying past. Between the waterfront cafe and the Pasadena restaurant people sat on benches, drinking coffee, waiting for the ferry, bags of shopping beside them. Children threw sticks into the water for dogs to leap in and retrieve. It was like the proverbial village pump where everyone's paths intersect, where gossip is exchanged, where the fragile fabric of society is woven and sewn and patched. A man in his sixties wearing a beanie and a bright yellow plastic life-jacket stood up from one of the benches and beckoned. Clean-shaven, average height and build. Plant walked over to him.

'Slater,' Slater said.

'Plant,' Plant said.

'Boat's here,' Slater said, pointing to a battered tinny tied up at a no tie-up zone. He clambered in. Plant followed, lowering himself to the metal bench beside a filthy, damp towel, and fitting his feet in between a rusting iron anchor and a plastic fuel container. Slater got the motor started and they chugged away from the wharf towards Scotland Island.

'Look,' he said, 'fairy penguins.'

Plant looked, saw something moving rapidly through the water.

'Or furry penguins if you prefer. Ferry penguins, even.'

'Are there sharks?' Plant asked.

'There are always sharks,' Slater intoned lugubriously.

'Here?'

'Why not? How can you have paradise without the snake?'

Plant pondered a reply. Before he could come up with anything Slater had answered himself.

'Very easily, I would have thought. Or is that too utopian?'

He fixed Plant with a look of intense scrutiny.

Plant said that he didn't know.

A seaplane flew low overhead, single-engined, two huge floats suspended from the wings and fuselage.

It was like a picture from an old *Boys' Own Paper.* Or the cover of a book by Captain W. E. Johns or J. F. C. Westerman.

The island waterfront was punctuated with long wooden jetties reaching out to the deeper water. Slater manoeuvred alongside one of them and held onto the steps reaching down into the water as Plant clambered out. Slater tied up and joined him, leading the way down the jetty to a metal cage at the foot of the cliff. He slid the gate open, gestured for Plant to climb in, and then followed him. A sudden shudder and the cage began to ascend, climbing the cliff face amongst the casuarinas and spotted gums, leafy branches reaching over and brushing their hair, the inclinator juddering as it rose.

It let them out at the deck of a pole house set on the steeply rising slope. 1960s timber beach-house style. Good location. The land value, waterfront, deep water jetty, made it a valuable property, even if the house was nothing special. Looking down, the drop seemed precipitous. Plant looked away, focusing instead on the deck, timbers encrusted with a patina of black grime, mould and rot. The nails had worked loose and risen and the planks rattled as you walked on them. Plant put a hand on the rail and it swayed precariously.

'Yes,' Slater said, 'best be careful of that. Needs fixing. Keep meaning to get round to it. But you know how it is. You get used to it. Work round it. Just don't lean too hard. And keep your shoes on so you don't get tetanus or blood poisoning from the rusty nails.'

'That's your advice.'

'It's either that or spend a fortune. When it finally gives way I'll get it fixed. If I'm still around then.'

Plant looked at him. He didn't seem on the way out. Not like the deck.

'Might sell up and move,' Slater explained. 'No point forking out money if you're going to leave.'

Below the deck the ground dropped away steeply, soaring tree trunks and grey boulders and blood-red bougainvillea interspersed with flowering perennials, pig face, maidenhair fern, black-eyed Susan.

'My partner's into gardening. Personally I believe in live and let live. Or die. Let nature take its course. But she has these notions. Bourgeois order. Keeping up appearances. Land care. The roots are supposed to stop the whole lot sliding away. It's a land-slip area.'

'Really.'

‘The whole peninsula. Not just the island. One day it will be like Japan. Or Colombia. Get some heavy rain, or a tsunami, and the whole lot will just slide into the bay.’

He seemed quite keen on the idea.

‘Is that likely to happen?’

‘I’d think so, wouldn’t you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said.

‘Entropy,’ Slater said.

It was a word Plant hadn’t heard for a long time. He wasn’t quite sure it was appropriate. But then he had never been quite sure what it meant.

‘Change is all,’ Slater said. ‘Or all is change. Whichever.’

Chapter 4

They sat out on the deck in a couple of faded green, canvas director’s chairs, beneath the faded green, canvas shade-sail. Up in the sky a bird of prey circled. An eagle or an osprey. Wide wingspan. Slow graceful curves. In the tree tops the other birds set up a sustained squawking and shrieking. Cockatoos, kookaburras, noisy miners, magpies, currawongs, lorikeets, a chorus of undifferentiated abuse as the predator passed overhead. Half a dozen boats were moored out in the water, a couple of little cabin cruisers for pottering around Pittwater, a high masted yacht with sails furled, a couple of larger vessels for venturing out into the ocean, and a flat, empty barge.

‘Safe enough out here,’ Slater said. ‘I don’t like to talk at the Point. Too much like a listening post for my comfort. Loose talk costs lives, as they used to say.’

‘Did they?’

‘So they say. A bit before my time. Now they encourage the opposite. Bare all on social media.’

Plant nodded and kept quiet.

‘So,’ said Slater, ‘what’s Fullalove told you?’

‘Nothing much,’ Plant said. ‘Just that you’ve got a problem.’

‘Right,’ Slater said. ‘I do. Simple enough. I’ve been applying for funding and I’m sick of getting knocked back.’

Plant nodded sympathetically. He waited. Slater waited. Silence.

‘Which is where you come in.’

‘Go on,’ Plant said.

‘I want to know who’s against me.’

‘I see,’ Plant said.

‘Find me my enemies.’

‘Right.’

‘Well, it’s not that difficult.’

‘You want to know why you’re getting knocked back.’

‘Not especially.’

‘Not especially?’

‘I’m not interested in what bullshit they come up with. I want to know who’s behind it.’

‘You figure someone’s behind it.’

‘Someone or something. Has to be.’

‘Maybe,’ Plant said.

‘What do you mean, maybe?’

‘Well, aren’t these things pretty much a lottery?’

‘Of course. If you’re not in it you can’t win it.’

‘True.’

‘So I’ve put in a dozen grant applications in the last couple of years.’

‘And you didn’t get anything.’

‘No. And it’s not a matter of getting recognition or anything. I’m not worried about that. I need the money.’

‘Fair enough,’ Plant said. ‘But maybe that’s just how it is now. More and more applicants. Fewer funds.’

‘That’s the sort of bullshit they come up with.’

‘You don’t believe it.’

‘I’ve been on those grants panels. I know how they work. It just needs a couple of people to shaft you, and you’re out. A couple of snide comments. Hints of this. Dismissal of that. Easily done.’

Plant nodded. It was true enough. Just needed a couple of rumours, some knowing aside amongst the assessors, and he’d be out. Anything to knock anyone out, always a horde of applicants, anything that would reduce the number of candidates and leave the field open for the chosen few was always welcome.

‘Who’ve you been applying to?’

‘Everyone. Australia Council, Australian Research Council, State Arts Ministry, Copyright Agency, National Library, State Library, Universities.’

‘And what do they say?’

‘What do you mean, what do they say? They say no.’

‘Do they give any reasons?’

‘No.’

‘Have you asked for reasons?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Why would I bother?’

‘They might offer some explanation.’

‘No they wouldn’t. They’d just rabbit on about the number of applicants and the high quality and so on.’

‘So why do you think they knock you back?’

‘How should I know?’

Plant looked at him.

‘If anyone is going to know it would be you.’

Slater laughed.

‘I’ve got theories.’

‘Which are?’

He looked at Plant steadily.

‘I think it would be better if you asked around without any preconceptions. That way you can’t say I put ideas into your head.’

‘Some ideas in my head might be useful.’

‘True. But I think I’d prefer it if you went in with a clean slate.’

‘Went in where?’

‘Asking around.’

‘Around?’

‘Around the assessors. Check out who’s on the panels and ask a few questions. See who’s blocking me.’

‘You think this way you’ll find out why you get knocked back.’

‘I know why. I want to know who.’

‘So you know why but not who?’

‘I’ve got a pretty shrewd idea who,’ he said. ‘I’d just like to have it confirmed. Objectively. An unprejudiced eye.’

Plant looked at the water out there, boats and stuff, and reflected.

‘You want a drink or something?’ Slater asked.

‘Tea would be good.’

‘It mightn’t be, but I’ll get you one. Water’s a bit off this time of year.’

‘Off?’ Plant said.

‘Tank water. It gets lerps. They make the water go brown. Don’t really need a tea bag. And it smells. Vile.’

He disappeared into the kitchen before Plant could rescind the order. He brooded on what Slater had told him. Out on Pittwater cormorants bobbed up above the surface for air and then dived down again in pursuit of fish. Once in a while a fish leapt up, avoiding pursuit from a bigger fish.

‘Is there a sub-text to all this?’ he asked Slater when he reappeared.

‘You bet there fucking is,’ Slater said, handing the mug of tea across.

Plant waited. They both waited.

‘So what might there be against you? What should I expect?’

‘No, I don’t want to prejudice you.’

‘It won’t prejudice me. I just want to know what’s going on.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘What it might be about. The rejections.’

‘Well, it’s political, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’

‘Isn’t it always?’

Plant was political enough to know to say nothing. Nothing to show he understood and agreed.

‘So tell me,’ he said.

Slater shook his head.

‘Better you find out for yourself.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I don’t want to prejudice you,’ he said again. ‘I don’t want to put ideas into your head. I might be wrong after all.’ He laughed, disbelievingly.

‘Wrong?’

‘Wrong about what it’s all about.’

‘Is that likely?’

Slater gave another long look at Plant.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘But you never know, as we used to say.’ He laughed again.

‘And we don’t say it any more?’

‘Not often. No. Now we know all the news.’

‘So why do you need me?’ Plant asked.

‘To make sure.’

‘Make sure of what?’

‘My sanity.’

Plant nodded. There was no other obvious response.

‘What are you going to do with this information?’

‘Does it matter?’

Plant scratched at an ear lobe. It could. Matter. If Slater was planning litigation, direct action, revenge, it could all rebound. Slater didn’t look the sort who would go out and kill someone. Or hire a contract killer. But people rarely did look like that. Until later. Any or all of Slater’s possible responses could lead to trouble.

‘I need to know what I’m getting into,’ Plant said. As if he ever did.

‘Just so I can shape my application differently. If I apply again. And not waste time applying where there’s no hope. Assuming I apply again. If it looks like there’s any point. Which there probably won’t be. Or I could mount a legal case. Discrimination. At least it would embarrass them.’

‘Would it?’

‘Probably not. It works for some people. They demand and they get it. But they’re probably government men under cover, trying to look like troublemakers. Not sure it would work for me.’

‘But you don’t have any reports to mount a case with.’

‘They don’t give you a report, they just say no.’

‘Can’t you ask for one?’

‘Like I said, it would be bullshit. Why give them the satisfaction of thinking I care?’

‘But you do.’

Slater shrugged.

‘Could always do with the money,’ he said.

‘Fair enough,’ Plant conceded. ‘Though it would be a start. Something to go on. Having a report.’

‘No it wouldn’t. It would be a false start. Disinformation.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Without a doubt,’ Slater said.

They sat looking over Pittwater, tinnies with outboard motors droning past. The occasional yacht under sail. A barge with pile-driving equipment passing slowly. A few seagulls placidly floating around. The moored boats beyond Slater’s jetty staying moored.

‘It’s quite simple, I just want to know who’s against me. I’ve got my suspicions, obviously. I just need to be sure.’

‘Straightforward enough,’ Plant agreed.

Chapter 5

‘My mistake,’ Slater said, ‘was in not seeing it was all fucked from the beginning. Deals. Cronyism. Patronage. Commerce. Nothing to do with literature as I had fondly imagined it. I kept thinking things would get better. I’d make them better. My contribution. But the system was happy with the way it was. Still is. Don’t mess with it. It doesn’t like being messed with. You can’t beat the system.’

He looked at Plant as if expecting a reply. In particular, agreement.

‘That’s a bit defeatist, isn’t it?’

‘It’s the way it is. You can’t beat it. All you can do is manipulate it.’

He looked across again.

‘Go on,’ Plant said.

‘But to manipulate it you’ve got to be in it. To some degree, at least. Which means you’ve accepted it.’

‘Can’t you stand at a distance? Get in the right place with a lever and you can move the world. According to someone or other.’

‘So where’s the right place and how do you get there? Got a spaceship standing by? Don’t think I haven’t tried.’

High in the thermals the eagle soared in a widening circle. Looking for the tell-tale movement on the ground or in the water.

‘Surveillance,’ Slater said, with grim satisfaction. ‘Grabbed a Chihuahua off somebody’s wharf one time.’

‘Really?’

‘So they say. Island myth.’

Plant watched it warily.

‘I should have known,’ Slater went on. ‘But I believed the story they put around. Just write something good and your talent will be spotted and there you are. Made it. Fame. Glamour. Money.’ He gave the usual hollow laugh. ‘I was right about one thing, though. We were being watched. They spotted you all right. Literally. A couple of agents approached me. Even then, when I was just starting out. A babe in arms.’

‘Agents as in secret agents?’

‘Well, they could’ve been though they called themselves literary agents. Might as well have been secret agents for all the good they did me.’

'So what happened?'

'Nothing. I showed them what I'd written and that was it. Never heard from them again. Got to write the right thing. Quality doesn't have a lot to do with it. But they're always on the look out to see what you're doing.'

'I can believe it,' Plant assured him.

But Slater didn't need assurance.

'It's all under continual observation. Always has been. I used to write for a little literary magazine. Sold them a couple of stories. Went in one day and asked for some reviewing work which they gave me. Eighteen months later someone at one of the heavy weeklies sees the reviews, asks me to do some work for them. Serious money. Serious status. Then the *New Yorker* writes to me. Out of the blue. Same with the *London Review of Books.* This is over a period of years, mind you. A decade, say. So you're young. Youngish. You're thrilled. You're not especially flattered, you think this is the way it is, your talent is naturally recognised.

'But who's out there looking out for talent? Who funds the search process? Are they monitoring each generation, keeping their tabs on the next batch of intellectuals, writers, entertainers, celebrities? Checking them out and recruiting them or dropping them quick as a flash. Before you even know it you've been spotted, invited in, looked over and vetted. After that you're either in or you're out. I ended up out.'

'The weeklies hardly exist any more, so you'd be out whatever they decided about you.'

'True,' Slater agreed. 'They were all an illusion, anyway. Your mate Fullalove used to bang on about how none of them ever achieved a commercially viable circulation. They were all subsidised one way or another – to buy political influence, to promote the values and priorities of some branch of the British establishment or the CIA. Money laundering, maybe. Tax minimisation, almost certainly. The lost press we lament! What a joke! At the time we managed not to think about it. Now we can, of course. Now that there's hardly any print journalism left we can afford to think about its economic base. Who funded what and why. Not a good look.

'But no one's going to write about it. Either they're part of the system and they're not going to reveal its workings. Or they're not part of it and they're not going to go around and say they're losers. They're terrified they'll be laughed at. Sour grapes. Paranoia. There's no way you can write a history of how you've been fucked over without looking like you deserved it. That's the way narrative works. The way people read it. History is written by the winners.

‘You don’t believe me, get hold of *Who’s Who*. Look up a few names. The stars of our creative firmament. They reveal it all. All the fellowships and travel grants and residencies and funding they’ve got. Column after column. Think about it.

‘“State writer Bayes,” I said to the silly little bugger. He got quite upset. All of a tremolo tizz. It’s just like the old Soviet and Chinese system they condemn. At least the Soviets and Chinese were honest. State writers are state writers. Paid by the state. No false advertising. Our hirelings all pretend they’re free agents. Who do they think they’re kidding? Why would you believe it? Well, you wouldn’t, not after they list all the funding and awards and dishonours they’ve been propped up with. You’d think they’d keep quiet about it. Madness.’

‘Tell me.’

‘They list all this shit. Crazy. Premier’s award. Prime Minister’s award. Queen’s medal. Fulbright award. Churchill fellowship. Woodrow Wilson fellowship. Marshall fellowship. Keating fellowship. Order of Australia.’

‘And?’ Plant said.

‘Look at the names. If they don’t sound political, what does? Premier, Queen, think about it. You really think the state cares about the art of the novel? Of course not. It’s all about control. And how better to exercise control than by handing out fellowships and prizes. Funds for writers’ retreats. Nobel prize. I mean, look at it. Kissinger a peace prize? Obama, the face that launched five thousand drones. Anyway, just have a look at all this shit our national treasures list and ask yourself who’s funding it, what it’s all about.’

‘So what is it all about?”

‘Control. Deception. Spookery. The way to go, of course. Somerset Maugham, Compton Mackenzie, Graham Greene. The Waughs had “cordial links” with the secret services for three generations, according to Evelyn’s grandson. The way to go. Join the secret service, do your tour of duty, after that you make your choice – you can have a caravan park, a radio arts programme or a three book contract. I remember reading an interview with John le Carré years ago, complaining that one of his books got bad reviews. The British secret service didn’t like it, and they controlled book reviewing, he said. Pretty amazing. But he’d know, I imagine.’

‘And you believed him?’

‘He was secret service.’

‘So why believe anything he said?’

‘Good point,’ Slater conceded. ‘I still think it’s true.’

‘Could be disinformation.’

‘True. But the general point remains.’

‘The general point?’

‘Much as I hate to say it, since I can’t stand his stuff, Le Carré undoubtedly had it right on this issue. Forget the free press. The secret service controls it.’

He caught Plant’s look of apprehension, anxiety.

‘You think I’m mad. You think Le Carré’s mad. But think about it, there’s never been a free press. Go back to the beginnings. The first English newspapers came out in the English civil war. Before that it was illegal to publish domestic news. Then parliament puts out one news sheet, and the king’s party puts out another. Both controlled. Both propaganda exercises. The origins of the English language newspaper were in partisan politics, not in any concern for the truth.

‘Same thing now. Except there’s only one side now. Look at your news reports. The majority of the population opposed the war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan. But did the media reflect that? No, they were all rabid, militaristic, gung-ho, not a glimpse of criticism about our being there. Our young heroes killed. What a joke. These aren’t conscripts, they’ve enlisted by choice, trained killers, special forces, they volunteered to kill. How many Afghanis and Iraqis did they kill before they got theirs? Anybody ask that? You watch the news, you’d think think there were wars people believed in. There aren’t; they don’t. But the media tell us we should. So who tells the media? The government. All right, who tells the government? The secret service, on behalf of the Americans, the bankers, arms dealers. Anyway, you get the point. So just start there. Free press: ideal or delusion. Discuss.’

‘How come you know this historical stuff?’ Plant asked. ‘Did you teach or something?’

‘Yes, I taught. I did a degree in English Literature because I wanted to write and then I figured teaching literature would be a good day job for a novelist. So that’s what I did. Literature to begin with. Then when they’d scrapped most of the old literature courses I taught creative writing. Hardly any literature courses left. So you’re teaching creative writing to students who never get to read any books. All those students who used to be trained to read novels and encouraged to buy them now just want to write themselves or read theory; so the market for serious new writing collapses. Can’t live off writing any more. Not sure that you ever could.

Unless you were a spook, you taught. Or were a journalist. Not that you couldn't be a spook as well as an academic or a journalist.'

'You're saying all the writers who don't teach or who aren't journalists are spooks?'

'Pretty much, I'd think. Look at their books. By their works ye shall know them. Anyway, to be a writer you need a job. Unless you've got a private income. I taught.'

'How was that?'

'It was good for a while. In the end it got unbearable and I got out. All that literary theory. It swept through. Get rid of novels and poems and plays and just teach theory. You know what it was, it was the academic Mujahedin. The CIA comes in, how can we stop this left-wing shit, the revealed relationship of literature to life. Can't allow that. Let's get some intellectual thugs, all those French poststructuralists and literary theorists, all crap, all mystification, all irrelevant, their only purpose to displace and destroy any socialist tradition, so they arm these fuckers, give them publishing contracts, set them up at Yale or some place, translate the stuff and promote it and market it. It does the job. Sees off the left. Like they did in Afghanistan with the Mujahedin. Now what are these fuckers going to do now they've been armed and funded? Now they're unstoppable, now what they're going to do is destroy the whole tradition of western literary culture. Madness.'

Madness, Plant reflected silently.

'You think I'm mad,' Slater said. 'Yes you do, I can see it in your eyes. The set of your mouth. That attempt to control a smirk at the corner of your lip. See, you even have to scratch your nose, trying to conceal it.'

Plant smiled. It seemed the only option.

'Novelist's training,' Slater said. 'Years spent observing peoples' expressions. The sort of telling detail fiction depends on to bring the narrative alive. That's what writing's about.'

'Is it?'

'Amongst other things.'

Plant nodded.

'It's the other things that get you into trouble,' Slater said. With a degree of satisfaction.

'And is getting into trouble what it's about?' Plant asked.

'What's the point otherwise?'

'It might be a bit self-defeating.'

‘You can say that again.’

‘It might be a bit self-defeating,’ Plant said again.

Slater laughed. ‘Ah, a smart arse.’

Plant nodded, almost imperceptibly, but not quite.

‘Part of the requirement for a private-eye, is it?’ Slater asked. ‘That, and getting into bed with treacherous blondes and walking down mean streets?’

Chapter 6

A white cockatoo landed on the rail of the deck. It raised its sulphur crest and took a few lumbering steps.

‘Fuck off,’ Slater shouted, waving his arms.

The cockatoo cocked a curious eye at Slater. So did Plant.

‘Not you,’ Slater said to Plant. ‘Bloody birds. They eat the deck. Destructive little bastards. The mistake is to feed them. But you do. They come and beg. Cock their heads at you. Fix you with a beady eye. So you give them some crumbs. Bits of biscuit. Left over scraps. And then they get to expect it. They demand more and if you don’t give them anything they come and eat your deck.’

The cockatoo dug its beak into the rail and tugged, gouging out a sliver of wood. Slater raised himself from his chair and waved his arms some more. The cockatoo bit into the wood more determinedly. Slater advanced on the bird. Menacingly. What was meant as menacingly. The cockatoo flapped its wings and made a leisurely take off to the nearest branch of the nearest spotted gum and settled there.

‘You’ve got to wonder,’ Slater said. ‘Are they trained? Are they carrying surveillance cameras?’

Here we go, thought Plant. Now we have it. Stark raving bonkers. I might have guessed.

Across the water, above the ridge of the national park, the seaplane throbbed steadily past towards the city.

‘Used to be De Havilland Beavers, now they’ve got Cessnas,’ Slater said, leaving the deck and going inside the house.

The plane-spotter's information sounded sane enough.

Plant turned and watched him through the window, rummaging around amongst a stack of books and folders and papers on a table in the corner of the room. Pre-digital man. He found a yellowed sheet of newspaper and waved it in the air.

Am I supposed to leap off the deck and join the cockatoo? Plant wondered.

'You may well think I'm bonkers,' Slater said, coming back out to the deck. He smiled, disarmingly, even with the off-putting, yellowed teeth. 'But, as has been said before, and why waste a good line, truth is stranger than fiction. Alas, for us novelists.'

Plant nodded. No doubt this was truth, this moment on Pittwater, not a parallel fictional universe. No doubt it was strange.

'The Israelis have done it. Given our government's traditional embrace of the Israeli state, wouldn't they have sold us the technology? At a good price, no doubt.'

Plant tried to keep nodding. The international Jewish conspiracy. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Here we go.

Slater put on his glasses and intoned: '"Officials in Sudan say they have captured an electronically tagged vulture suspected of spying for Israel. Sudanese officials are said to have concluded the bird was a secret agent after discovering it was fitted with GPS and solar-powered equipment capable of broadcasting images via satellite." How about that? Smile for the camera. But don't say anything. It may not have sound but they'll be able to lip-read you.'

Plant ran his hand across his mouth. Oh no. Spare me. This cannot be.

'Of course, we don't have vultures here. National Parks and Wildlife probably opposed their introduction. But these cockatoos, they're perfect. Fearless. Shameless. They come right up to your house. Look in the windows. Eat out of your hand. Biscuits. Seeds. Fruit. Anything. And all the time you've achieved the ambition of your life. You're on television. And you don't even know it.'

'Really,' Plant tried.

'Everyone wants to be on television.'

'I guess so.'

'"Israeli officials have acknowledged that the bird which can fly up to 375 miles a day had been tagged with Israeli equipment but insisted it was being used to study migration patterns ... blah blah ... one of 100 vultures fitted in October with a GPS system to take distance and

altitude readings but not surveillance images." Yeah, well, they would say that. Pretty nifty, hey? Of course, that was more military than internal security. Assuming there's any difference. They used them to target a munitions centre which they blew up. But all military applications can be adapted for civilian functions. You don't want vultures flying 375 miles a day. What you want are these fat fuckers sitting on someone's deck all day, just keeping check.'

'You really think ...'

'The technology's there. Why wouldn't you use it?'

'I guess,' Plant said. Seemed fair enough. Maybe he should buy a cockatoo or three. Useful backup for a private-eye. Might require a bit of training. How would you be sure they got the right address? 'Do you think you're under surveillance?' he asked.

'Aren't we all? Closed circuit television in every shopping mall, outside every bank, on every city street. Electronic tags for bridge tolls, motorway tolls. Traffic cameras with number plate recognition on every major road. Mobile phones that give out your position. Phones hacked into. E-mails monitored. Internet usage recorded and collected and sold on.'

'I guess so,' Plant said again.

'And has this massive surveillance reduced crime, would you say, from your observation of the news?'

'Doesn't seem to have done.'

'But what about vocal, left-wing critiques of government policy and working conditions? Do we hear as much about that as we used to?'

'No,' Plant agreed.

'So there you are. We've been silenced.'

'So do you think you personally are under surveillance?'

'Me personally?' Slater said. 'Now why would that be?'

Was it a defensive response? Or heavy irony?

'As a man of the left? Your writings?'

'Someone's actually reading my books?'

Plant shrugged.

'I imagine it would be just routine,' Slater said. 'Best not to get delusions of grandeur. I don't think I'm a threat to the foundations of the state. But I imagine the state opens a file on any writer who remotely deals with the way things are. Mind you, most of them avoid anything like

that at all. They aim to be content free and, let me tell you, they achieve their aim. And to be fair, it's hard work avoiding ever saying anything, you've got to give it to them. But it's the way to go. If you want to be a national treasure. The way for awards and accolades and a media profile. The way to get into print and stay there.'

'But you don't know for sure.'

'For sure? For sure you'd be mad not to assume it.' He fixed Plant with a steady gaze. Bloodshot. But steady. 'And when you do assume it, that ensures everyone thinks you're mad. True?'

'I don't know,' Plant said.

'But it's what you're thinking.'

'You haven't asked to see your files? What about Freedom of Information?'

'What indeed?' Slater said. 'Like free speech and the free press. Free as in free market. And free lunch. No such thing. The illusions people live by.'

'But not you.'

'Me? Disillusion is my middle name.'

'So you haven't applied.'

'Why would I?'

'To find out whether they do have a file on you.'

'What if there isn't one?'

'Then they don't.'

'You believe that?'

'Believe what?'

'That if they said there wasn't a file, that means they had nothing on me.'

'I guess so.'

'What sort of investigator are you?'

Plant bridled. 'What do you mean?'

'A very naive one.' He cut Plant off before he could respond. 'You think everything they do they put on file? Every file they kept can be accessed?'

Plant shrugged. He didn't like being cut off. Let alone being called naive.

'People have looked.'

'What sort of people?'

‘Idiots. Academics. Provocateurs. Always some trusty or paranoid nosing around.’

‘And?’

‘And they say, “We looked into the files and there wasn’t anything on you.” As if somehow I’m at fault. Very strange. They look at you with this shifty smirk. “What sort of radical are you? You haven’t even got a file.”’

‘So there wasn’t one.’

‘Maybe not. Who knows? Certainly not any of them.’

‘So?’

‘Basic strategy, I would have thought. Nothing on file. So they can say, “No, there’s nothing on you. You’re just paranoid. Like we always said. Deluded. Self-aggrandising. Why would anyone open a file on you?”’

‘So there’s no point in trying Freedom of Information?’

‘None. It would just alert them that you’re looking. Gives them time to bury the file somewhere else. Shred it. If the Stasi could shred stuff, do you imagine we can’t?’

‘We?’

‘Them, then.’

Plant took in the view some more. A water-taxi cutting across the bays. A barge with a garbage truck. A couple of sailing boats under power, sails furled away. A grey heron stalking along the water’s edge.

‘I get your point,’ Plant said.

‘But do you agree with it?’

Plant shrugged again.

‘Look,’ Slater said, ‘for a start, if there wasn’t a file, there soon would be. “Since you asked for your file, we’ll open one, since obviously you must be up to something. Subversive thoughts at the very least.”

‘And if there was one?’

‘It would just stir them up. Get it re-activated. Higher level of alert. And what would that achieve?’

‘There have been books about the files.’

‘Of course there have. Part of the disinformation process. Look, no half-competent secret agency is going to put anything significant down in writing. Any dirty tricks they’ve done aren’t

going to be recorded. Like breaking into your house and putting depressants into your mineral water. Telling your boss you've got a drug habit. Making sure you don't get a grant. There'd never be any paper trail on that.'

'You've given it some thought.'

'You bet I have.'

High overhead the eagle soared in its steady circuit.

'What do you reckon?' Slater asked, looking up at it. 'Neat?'

A family of four kookaburras burst out into raucous laughter from a dead branch of the spotted gum. Four of them, anyway. Maybe not a family. Maybe they were an SAS team. High-explosives lodged in their capacious beaks.

Spare me, Plant begged silently.

The kookaburras cackled away derisively.

'Very humorous, as my Japanese translator used to describe them,' Slater said.

Their beaks curled upwards at the jaw in the slightest suggestion of a smile.

'So would you say your writing was political?' Plant asked.

'Would I?'

'Enough to make you a person of interest?'

'Everyone was political back then.'

'Back when?'

'When I was political.'

'Everyone?'

'Except for those who've become successful. And even some of the political ones became successful. Calling a protest march one year and becoming an investment banker the next. Makes you wonder.'

'So how would you describe yourself?'

'Is this some sort of interrogation? Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?'

'Have you?'

'Of course not.'

'Did you call yourself a communist?'

‘I doubt it. It was a sort of declassé term. A bit vulgar. Didn’t have the intellectual cachet of saying you were a Marxist.’

‘And did you?’

‘What?’

‘Say you were a Marxist?’

‘I might have referred to something I was doing as a Marxist way of doing things. I remember Tuscan Bayes sniggering: “Amazing how your reputation faded after you came out as a Marxist.” Horrid little bugger. Not that I read much Marx. I tried. Oh, I tried.’

‘And did it?

‘Did what?’

‘Your reputation fade?’

‘You bet.’

‘What I’m trying to establish ...’

‘Ah, there is a point to this.’

‘I’m trying to get some sort of context. Like, is there a political dimension to your not getting funding?’

‘Well ...’

Plant could see him calculating, his tongue flickering against his teeth, tossing over the various smart, ironic responses. In the end he seemed to have decided to give up fooling around.

‘I think so. That’s what I think. Pretty much.’

‘And you want me to prove it?’

‘In a nutshell, yes.’

Why a nutshell? Plant wondered. He could have asked. No doubt Slater could have come up with an explanation. More than one, probably. A squirrel’s hoard of them.

‘There are a number of factors,’ Slater explained. ‘If your name is flagged as trouble, then you’re in trouble. Active discrimination. But there’s always the passive sort. If you’re not on the team you lose out. There are so many men and women doing the government’s work under the cover of being a writer. It’s a wise career move, for a writer. Secures the economic base. They fix you up with publication, book contracts, magazine columns, movie deals. Fellowships. Grants. Jobs. Awards. By the time they’ve fixed up their people on the payroll,

there's not much left to go around for anyone else. So you can lose out that way, by not being part of the machine.'

'Is the machine that big?'

'I guess that's one of the things you need to find out.'

'No I don't,' Plant said, 'I'm not here to explore the ramifications of the secret state.'

'No?'

'You asked me to look into possible prejudice against you.'

'Well, let's drop the possible for a start. And then you need to see it in context. And that's the context. Your books get rejected. Or if they get published, they get fucked up. The easiest way to suppress a book is to publish it. And then let it die. No promotion. Or if you want to get more subtle, delay, delay, delay. Delay on the cover art so long that there are no copies printed before publication day. Review copies don't get sent out before the books are in the shops. Reviews editors decide the book's going to be out of date by the time any review gets written, so they don't get it reviewed. Or if they do review it, the reviews don't appear till the copies have been returned to the publisher on sale or return so they're not in the shops if anyone wants to buy a copy. Then the publisher pulps the returns as damaged copies, rather than make them available as remainders. So your book vanishes totally. You don't win any prizes. It makes no impact at all.'

'And you've got evidence of this?'

'I've got personal experience of it. And after stuff-ups like that you inevitably get knocked back whenever you apply for a grant because they can say your last book bombed.'

'So, are you being victimised, or are you missing out because it's a crowded field?'

'That's it. They're the choices.'

'How did you get on a list in the first place?'

'How would you reckon?

'One of your rivals dob you in as politically unsound?'

'Rivals,' Slater said in contempt. 'But yes, probably, some evil, envious fucker. There'd be someone in the scene. More than one.'

'And you want me to find out who?'

'Find out who's still fucking me over, yes. You know, I began with a sympathy for the poor and oppressed and exploited of the world, and I've ended up moaning about how my

career's been fucked because I used to care about the poor and oppressed and exploited of the world but now I only seem to care about conspiracies and control and secret police. Is this a mature development? I ask myself. Is this an inevitable process towards understanding? Or am I fucked?'

'But you want to know who's against you on the funding panels.'

'Too right I do,' Slater said.

'And get your name off the list?'

'Are you putting me on?' Slater asked. 'Once you're on a file, you're on a file for life. No one ever gets off. Same as being an agent, once you're in you're in for life.'

Plant shook his head wearily, the horror, the horror.

'It's not dramatic stuff,' Slater said. 'It's just that your books get rejected. Or if they get published they don't get reviewed. Or you get knocked back when you apply for a grant. You don't win any prizes or get any awards. That's all. Being paranoid doesn't mean you have to live in a horror movie. You've got your name on a black list. But it doesn't necessarily mean they're going to put poisonous snakes under your door. Though there again, my neighbour tells me there have been a few black snakes around the island lately.'

Chapter 7

Plant settled down at his computer and began an internet search. If he'd done it before he met Slater he might have been better prepared. But he hadn't. There were 174,000 or so items. He went to Wikipedia first. It gave him a name and a list of a dozen books Slater had written and a handful more he'd edited. No photograph. Not much at all. No web-site. No home page. No social media. No contact address. No agent.

He went back to the search results. Publishers' websites. Booksellers' websites. A batch of second-hand booksellers with Slater titles for sale. $15. $9. $2. $32. Didn't seem to be commanding high prices. Maybe there were a lot of copies around. Maybe no one was collecting him. Who collected books any more, anyway?

He clicked on next and next again and next again. AustLit website. A few more brief entries on various biographical or book sites, none of them offering much information, nothing

more than the little he had already. A few articles by Slater over the last few years. Book reviews.

He tried narrowing the search. Put in Slater and politics, then changed his mind and replaced politics with radical. A batch of new items came up. So the search engine wasn't prioritising the radical. Interesting. Reassuring, too, that the personalizing and customizing agenda of the search engine hadn't defined Plant's recurrent interests as being radical. A relief in these times.

It was comparatively old stuff that came up, written some years earlier, and concerned with even earlier events. Slater looking back at protest movements, focussed way back even if written as a retrospective. Remembering the underground. Reflections on the alternative. What did the protest movements achieve? A review of a book on the seventies. A review of a book on the sixties. A review of a book on the Cold War. They were all dated a few years back. Didn't look like he was getting much reviewing any more. Or much work at all. Plant could empathise with that. He knew how it felt. And it made him feel comparatively cheered. At least this wasn't a client who was going to provoke his envy and resentment. Good not to have your less admirable qualities stirred up.

His back started to ache. He could get up and walk around. Stretch. Salute the dawn. Touch his toes. Maybe. Or he could get off the computer and go and do something else. Find another source of information. Plant was not one of those who believed everything was on the internet. A lot was, for sure. Even more surely a lot more wasn't.

Plant called in on Mac Arber. Rare and collectable books. Gritted his teeth and opened the shop door and the irritating little bell rang and Mac Arber peered over his bifocals from behind his counter. The duet from *The Pearl Fishers* in the background.

'Plant!' Mac Arber called out, as if overjoyed. 'What are you doing back? You're not supposed to be here. Plants are supposed to stay where they're planted. You can't just float in here like some airborne spore.'

'Spore!' Plant said.

'A spore. Definitely. Fungal. If not indeed viral. Wafting through the atmosphere. You're supposed to have been transplanted to the bush. You can't just drop down from the upper ether.'

‘Ether?’ Plant said.

‘Ether. Nitrous oxide. Amyl nitrate. One of those things.’

‘Well here I am.’

‘Let me guess. You’ve come to buy a book. You’re reading again. You’ve weaned yourself away from all that horrible television. And those even horrider girls. How lovely to see you. What can I offer? *Memoirs of a Victorian Policeman* perhaps. Or the life of Dashiell Hammett? How about *The Newgate Calendar*?

Plant stood there in weary resignation.

‘Oh, that look of weary resignation,’ Mac Arber said. ‘How delightful to see it again. That petulant pout. So poignant. So pressing. How can I satisfy it? What are you after?’

‘Slater,’ Plant said.

‘Your roof is leaking? Very hard to fix. You’re not replacing the corrugated iron, are you? Slate is so expensive. Best to sell up and move on.’

‘You got any of his books?’

Mac gestured at his shelves, his walls, his desk.

‘Try under S,’ he suggested.

‘Does he sell?’

‘Does anything?’ Mac asked. But he was out from behind the desk and looking along the shelves, delving and poking and tut-tutting at the chance of a sale. He held up a couple of paperbacks, Slater’s photograph on the back, back in time.

‘Good looking young fellow,’ Mac said, ‘in those days. Self-aggrandising, of course. As they all were. Ah, youth!’

‘What are they about?’ Plant asked.

‘Words, words, words.’

Plant widened his mouth in a brief, insincere smile.

‘Well,’ Mac Arber said, ‘in those days it was all about show. Verbal pyrotechnics they used to call it. After that the advertising men moved in and it became all about making money. Though I don’t imagine Slater made much. He got the call.’

‘The call?’

‘Be meaningful. Have a cause. Become the nation’s conscience. Right the world’s wrongs.’

‘And did he?’

‘Have our wrongs been righted? Has the world become a better place?’

‘You seem to be doing all right,’ Plant said.

‘I know not seems,’ Mac said. ‘It remains a struggle.’

‘Of course. But you survive.’

‘Just. But there again, I observe caution.’

‘In what way?’ Plant asked, looking at the curiosa and curiosa section through locked glass doors.

‘I accept the universe,’ Mac said. ‘I don’t attempt to right it.’

‘And Slater did?’

‘Alas, poor fellow, he tried.’

‘But he didn’t succeed?’

‘Does anyone?’

‘Was he any good?’

Mac stood there, torn between the malice of the literary world and the desire to make a sale.

‘It’s not for me to pre-empt your role,’ he said, ratcheting up to fulsome mode, ‘your judgment in these things is far in advance of mine.’

He turned the pages of Slater’s books, absently, reflectively.

‘I’m sure you’ll find them rewarding.’

Plant took them from him and checked the pencilled in prices.

‘They’re very hard to come by,’ Mac said.

‘A big demand for them, is there?’ Plant asked. ‘Or there aren’t many around because there never were, pulped as soon as printed?’

‘What can I say?’ Mac asked, saying nothing before he’d got a firm sale and the cash was in the till. And saying nothing afterwards, either.

Chapter 8

Jacqueline Gold's office was just up the road in Glebe from MacArber's bookshop. She was everything you might expect from an agent, as clichéd as the books she all too successfully hawked around the literary marketplace. Indescribable in terms acceptable within the prescriptions and proscriptions of political correctness, she was ignorant, opinionated, coarse and full of an exuberant hostility towards literature and writers. The walls of her office were adorned with the framed covers of appalling books she had sold. The walls themselves were an insistent golden orange, like oxidised supermarket apple juice, matching her name and hair and leather executive's chair. She was not called Agent Orange for nothing. Indeed nothing was not a concept associated with her reputation. Everything had its price.

'So?' she snarled, the inhuman face of cultural degradation, turned on Plant.

'Slater,' he said.

'Not interested,' she said. 'Box office poison.'

'Box office?'

'Never even made the box office. Kiss of death. Wouldn't touch him with a barge pole. Got a reputation to maintain.'

'You or him?'

'Ha ha,' she said. She said it as two words. It was not a laugh.

'Anything else? Time is money.'

'I suppose it is,' Plant said. 'Who said that? Shakespeare? Jane Austen? I hadn't thought of it like that.'

She scowled.

'So you wouldn't recommend him for a fellowship. Publication subsidy. Travel grant.'

'You've got it,' she said.

'So why is that?'

'A loser,' she said. 'Stuck in the past. Brain addled with drugs and politics.'

'Politics?'

'Hippy shit. Workers of the world unite.'

'I'm not sure hippies identified with the workers.'

'I wouldn't know,' she said.

'But Slater would?'

‘I’ve no idea and even less interest,’ she said. ‘He wrote a couple of books. Dead in the womb. Instant remainders. No one wants to hear that boring shit any more.’

‘What sort of boring shit?’ Plant asked.

‘The boring shit Slater tried to write. Those days are gone.’

‘And him with it?’

‘Hopefully,’ she said.

‘So this is a personal view, or is it the wisdom of the market place?’

‘What are you asking?’

‘Is this just your opinion or is it widely shared?’

‘Life’s too short to spend any time thinking about no-hopers like Slater.’

‘So his name’s not one that’s on the tip of every publisher’s tongue.’

‘His name doesn’t exist,’ she said. ‘He’s off the board. Way back. You can try hawking him around but no one’s going to bite.’

‘Right,’ Plant said.

‘Anything else?’

‘I think that about covers it.’

He got up to leave.

‘And take the manuscript with you,’ she said.

‘I didn’t bring one.’

‘So take your pick,’ she said, pointing to a pile stacked on a table beside the door. She grinned. Not a pleasant sight.

Chapter 9

‘Slater?’ Sled said. ‘Is he still alive?’

Plant said nothing. Sled had insisted on meeting at the university. As far as Plant knew Sled had no academic qualifications or affiliations. Maybe he had one of those questionable adjunct appointments for time-servers and re-cycled politicians. Maybe he had got himself attached to Media Studies or the American Center. It was a depressing thought. So was Sled’s response, given that he had been on the panel that had rejected Slater’s latest application for

funds. Maybe he hadn't looked through all the paperwork. Maybe he had short-term memory loss.

'Thought he would've OD'd years ago,' Sled added.

'Really?'

'What are you telling me? He's still around?'

'He just applied for a writer's fellowship.'

Sled snorted. He was short and overweight and had a line in snorts and snuffles. They went with his shaggy hair, like an unkempt koala with sinus problems.

'No point giving him a fellowship. It would go straight up his nose. Or into his arm.'

'Is that so?'

'Common knowledge.'

'So you didn't support his application.'

'What application?'

'For a fellowship.'

'What fellowship?'

'The one you were an assessor for.'

Sled didn't miss a beat, not the fraction of a snuffle.

'Can't discuss that. Confidential,' he said.

'Ah,' Plant said.

They sat on metal chairs, uncomfortably, beside the old student union building. Students streamed past, sat at the tables, ate and drank and left, milled around. Sled eyed them all with scrupulous attention.

'So you're saying he's ...'

'Hopeless,' Sled said. 'Can't trust people like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like Slater.'

'In what way?'

'Hopeless.'

'Hopeless?'

'Hopeless. Can't complete. No staying power. They don't even begin, half the time.'

'Is he any good?'

‘Any good? Of course not.’

‘What about his work?’

‘What work? Is there any?’

‘His books.’

‘Who ever saw them? Years ago. Sunk without trace.’

‘Why was that?’

‘Because they weren’t any good.’

‘You read them?’

Sled bristled. More fretful anteater than koala.

‘What is this? An interrogation?’

Plant smiled. He had been practicing smiling. He found it good for disconcerting people.

‘Just trying to get a picture of Slater. What sort of reputation he has. Amongst his peers.’

Sled scowled. ‘Peers? You think he’s in the House of Lords of something? He doesn’t have any peers. He’s a lost cause. Never was a cause.’

‘Despite the books.’

‘Anyone can write a book,’ Sled said.

‘So he has written some.’

‘No impact. No one reads them.’

He wiped the coffee from the unshaven bristles around his lips.

‘The trouble with government funding,’ he said, ‘is you’ve got to give people a chance. To begin with. Let them show what they’ve got. And some turn out to have got nothing. So you have to cut them off.’

‘So you cut Slater off.’

‘Me? Nothing to do with me. I’m just telling you how the system works.’

‘So Slater was cut off.’

‘Obviously not firmly enough if he’s still around.’

‘But that’s what you’d recommend.’

Sled snorted throatily.

‘Too many of these people,’ he said. ‘Their own worst enemies. Wandering the streets. Full of drugs and paranoia and conspiracy theories.’

‘Which you don’t accept.’

‘Accept? What? Slater’s insane ravings? I certainly do not. The man’s certifiable.’

‘Ah.’

‘Even by the standards of the literary community.’

‘The literary community has standards?’ Plant asked.

‘I invited him to lunch once,’ Sled said.

Sled had a regular weekly lunch. Journalists, writers, lobbyists, information gatherers and rumour-mongers.

‘Off his face. Would only drink mineral water. Raving on about conspiracies. Looking for microphones in the salt cellars. Arguing about the bill.’

Sled took cash from his lunch guests and paid the total by credit card. Speculation was he got a kickback on the total, as well as the frequent flyer points on the credit card. But people went along with it. Except Slater, apparently.

‘Did he find any microphones?’ Plant asked.

Sled glowered.

‘You’re as mad as Slater,’ he snapped. ‘Very funny,’ he added. He tried to crack a smile. Plant mirrored it.

Chapter 10

Plant decided to make another visit to Scotland Island. He phoned Slater who said take the ferry and get off at the first wharf and he would meet him there. Up to Pittwater again. Did he feel better informed now, in a better position to assess Slater? His client. Or did he just feel like having a day in the country? After Fullalove’s less than desirable inner city residence Scotland Island seemed liked country. Clear air. Clear water. Birds and boats. Plant found himself eager to get back there. He was losing his affection for the city. Too hard to get around. Too crowded. Too noisy. More and more it was all controlled and zoned and policed. Like there had been a war and the occupying armies were running it. Tourists here. Chinatown there. Gays here. Rich people there. Bicycles everywhere. More and more product for sale and all of it the same. Same shopping malls. Same big business. Same franchises. Same fast food outlets. Just getting on the

ferry was like an adventure. The great escape. As soon as it gave its three hoots and backed out from the wharf, he could feel the cares and grime and stress of urban living drop away. Fish leapt out of the water. Being chased by bigger fish and fairy penguins. And caught and eaten.

Slater greeted him as the ferry pulled in at the island. A hundred and sixty something steps up to the track, Slater informed him. Plant looked at them, stretching up the cliff.

The seaplane passed overhead, even higher.

'You can take it up to Palm Beach or Cottage Point for lunch,' Slater said. 'Restaurants. Wedding receptions. Fly off to your honeymoon.'

He gave a sardonic grunt. Or maybe he was short of breath. They climbed in silence, near silence anyway, punctuated by wheezing and coughing and gasping. Plant began counting the steps but lost track before reaching the top.

'Must keep you fit,' he said, all rural positiveness and breathlessness..

'Just stretches your arms from carrying groceries,' Slater said. 'But it discourages casual visitors and other undesirables, though. They can't just drive up to your door and rob you. Too hard to carry the loot away.'

They turned along a track, broken surfaced, full of pot-holes, the sort that people might fall into and drown in. Spotted gums and casuarinas and lantana rose on both sides, obscuring any clear view of the water. A couple of magpies fossicked around at the edge of the track, identical in size but one of them clearly young, piping an insistent beep of demand to be fed. After a while Slater turned off the track and headed down the cliff face, a muddy pathway through the trees leading to some steps and a door at the back of a timber house. Plant was hit by a familiar smell as the door was opened. Marijuana. Just the pervasive and pungent and indeed pleasant smell of it. No actual smoke to see. He breathed in deeply. It wasn't hard, he was out of breath anyway from the climb. His lungs were ready to gulp in a maximum intake. You never knew, passive smoking and all that, you might get a hit. Depended on how concentrated it was in the atmosphere. Seemed pretty concentrated.

'Let's sit outside,' Slater said,

'Sure,' Plant agreed, taking in a last breath, happy to sit anywhere.

Slater smiled knowingly.

'Less chance of bugs,' he said, walking out to the deck. 'Out here there's just the biting ones. I'll get you some insect repellent if you want. Unless you think a mosquito bite is less

dangerous than spraying yourself with chemicals. I spilt some once and it took the silicone finish off the table. Imagine what that does to your skin.'

'I'm fine,' Plant said. Wasted. Out of condition. He sank into one of the faded, canvas director's chairs.

'Stay that way,' Slater advised. 'Say no to Ross River fever. Say no to Barma Forest virus.'

'Are they around?'

'Could be,' Slater said, stretching out on a plastic recliner there. He gave an amiable grin. 'I'd offer you a smoke, but since I had my heart attack, I've had to give up.'

'That's all right,' Plant said. But it wasn't. As soon as the door opened and he'd smelled the smell he'd started thinking how enjoyable a smoke would be. Just sit there, grooving on the water view, watching the cockatoos watching you, or maybe chase them away, just in case, before lighting up. And the smoke would keep off the mosquitoes. And then it would be very pleasurable just to sit back and take in the restorative scene. Without a doubt someone had been getting stoned, denial notwithstanding, heart attack notwithstanding.

'It's the toxins in the smoke. They inflame the arteries according to my specialist.'

'Is that so?'

'Can you believe them?'

'Makes sense.'

'But is it true?'

'I don't know,' Plant said.

'Nor do I. But why take the risk? So I eat it. Got to heat it up first and get the THC activated. Just a couple of minutes. And you know what?'

'No,' Plant said, the man who knew nothing.

'Cook up enough for one joint and it keeps you going all day. I used to be smoking twelve or fifteen joints a day. So, a lot more economical. And it spares your lungs.'

'What about your stomach?'

'Just gives you the munchies. That's the downside. Diabetes. You find yourself eating biscuits. Chocolate. More biscuits. Halva. You know something, till I had my heart attack I hardly ate biscuits. But the hospital turned me on to them. Morning and afternoon tea. With

biscuits. Where are their heads at? Trying to kill people off with sugar and fat? I don't understand this world'

'But you ate them.'

'Still do.'

'And you understand about cooking dope.'

'You want to try some?'

'I wouldn't mind.'

'Is that a yes or a no?'

'A yes,' Plant said. He thought he'd been tentatively clear. Not a 'why not?' response. 'I'd love some,' he added. Spell it out to make sure.

'No need to get all emotional,' Slater said, pulling up his trouser leg and taking his stash out from the top of his sock. Not without something of a struggle. Bending over, gasping, trouser waist-band a tight fit, leg resistant to being raised.

'You need to be wearing flares,' Plant said.

'A very useful fashion,' Slater agreed. 'You could pack in a lot more. No give-away bulge. A lot to be said for the seventies.'

'There sure is,' Plant agreed. And there they were, still saying it.

Slater slowly heaved himself up. Not reluctantly. Not resentfully. Just coping with natural forces. Gravity. Inertia. Muscular degeneration.

'People used to make hash cookies. Can't see the point myself. All those commercial cake mixes, loaded with additives and preservatives. All that fat. And sugar. Does wonders for the cholesterol. If you believe all that cholesterol stuff.'

'Don't you?'

'There are arguments that cholesterol isn't the crucial factor. And that all that taking statins does is increase the risk of mortality. Liver cancer. Muscular degeneration. Who do you believe? The drug companies? The health professionals?'

He went back into the house and put a joint's worth of marijuana into an old, burned looking saucepan on the hot plate, switched on the extractor fan and opened the kitchen window.

'Celia complains about the smell.'

'I quite like it,' Plant said.

'Me too,' Slater agreed.

They sat and looked out across Pittwater as the dope cooked. The same half dozen boats were still moored there, the couple of cabin cruisers, the high masted yacht with sails furled, the couple of large ocean going vessels, the flat, empty barge.

'Circe's island,' Slater said. 'Maybe we've been metamorphosed into swine and don't know it.'

He went back inside and brought the smoking saucepan and a teaspoon out to the deck.

'Partake,' he said, giving the spoon to Plant.

Plant scooped up the blackened, scorched herb and ate it.

'A medical necessity,' Slater said. 'If there's ever any trouble, that will be my defence. Pain management.'

'Pain?'

'The pain of living.'

'Ah,' Plant said. 'Do you find it helps you write?'

Slater wrinkled his nose. The rest of his face followed it, scrunching up in sympathy.

'Do I use it to channel novels?'

'That sort of thing.'

'No need,' he said. He gestured at the sky. 'There's an infinite library up there, waiting to be accessed. We writers just have borrowing cards. We simply tune in and write it all down.'

'Is that how you do it?'

'I think so. Of course, you might say that's a way of abnegating responsibility. "I didn't make it up. It just came to me. Not my fault. It chose me, I didn't choose it." Not sure it's a defence that would hold up in court.'

'So you don't use dope to write.'

'For heaven's sake,' Slater said, 'I use it for life.'

'Life?'

A magpie settled on the wooden rail of the deck and burst out into a warbling song.

'The pain of life. To make it tolerable. Enjoyable even. Lift off the gloom. Unbearable without it. Nothing to do with writing. Though,' he reminisced, into that novelist's recall of his life and work mode, 'I won't say I never used it before starting off on the day's quota. But whether that was for the inspiration or just an excuse to have a joint first thing in the morning, who am I to say?'

‘So you no longer remember.’

‘Remember what? Most things are best forgotten. And it certainly helps with that.’

Chapter 11

While Slater fiddled around turning off the extractor fan and checking that the stove was off, putting his foot up on a chair to stuff his stash back into his sock, Plant looked around the room. He confirmed the impression he’d had on his first visit. The significance hadn’t registered then. Long rectangular room, high cathedral ceiling, beams exposed, kitchen down one end in an open-plan way, and the long expanse of windows and sliding doors looking out over Pittwater. The view was what dominated. And it was worth viewing, the blue water, the bush across the other side with houses and boatsheds at the water’s edge, National Park rising up behind them. The eagle of course. The cockatoos. But turning round from the window there was just a wall. No paintings. Fair enough. Slater was a writer. A word worth a thousand pictures. But there were hardly any books, either. A wooden bookcase was the only sign of literacy, and a shelf of that was filled with CDs, and another with telephone directories and computer handbooks and dictionaries. Another shelf was devoted to works of the master himself, and the bottom shelf contained more of the master, multiple copies, the usual unsold back list and remainders awaiting a good home. A few bedraggled paperbacks were stacked against the wall alongside.

‘I gave them away,’ Slater said. ‘My books.’

‘Tired of them? Read them all?’

‘Swamped by them. They were out of control. Every time I bought a new one I had to rearrange the shelves to find a space to put it in its proper place. Like alphabetical. If I didn’t find the right place, I’d never find it again. And more and more often when I found the place, I’d find I already owned a copy. Couldn’t remember what I already had, there were so many. It’s an addiction, collecting books. Not that I’ve got anything against addiction, Heavens forbid. Except addictions always have their downside.

‘I thought of going through them one by one and keeping back some of the treasures. The signed copies, the rare editions. But I knew if I started to do that, I’d end up keeping as many as I got rid of. So it was all or nothing.’

‘Was it a wrench?’

‘A liberation. Remember Leonard Bast in *Howards End*? Crushed to death beneath a falling bookcase. A warning to lower class youth of the dangers of aspiring to high culture. Apart from which I felt they’d been contaminated by some mind-altering depressant sprayed on them by the secret service or some like-minded body.’

‘Really?’ Plant asked.

Slater nodded.

‘Are you serious?’

Though he didn’t need to ask, he knew Slater was serious. Whether he was seriously mad was another question. He was certainly seriously paranoid.

‘Yes. Don’t you believe me? So I donated them to the university. For a considerable tax benefit, I might add. Cultural donations scheme. That was in the days when university libraries were accepting books rather than throwing them out. I thought that if I ever needed one of them again I’d always be able to borrow it. And at some future time I might get the contaminant analysed, so it would be good to have them all in safe storage. Ha!’ he snorted. ‘And they call me paranoid! Not even in the height of my alleged paranoia did I ever imagine that university libraries would start throwing books out, burying them as land fill. And when that scandal hit the press, they just put the books on trestle tables outside the library and gave them away. And what was left they shifted off campus into deposit and turned the stacks into coffee lounges for overseas students. The new dark ages.’

‘How did you get all your books up here when you had them?’ Plant asked.

‘I didn’t. When I was teaching at university, I kept them there. That’s where they got contaminated. When I decided to get out, it seemed like the time to get rid of them. Rather than bring them up here.’

‘Why did you decide to get out?’

‘Not much to get out of. Short term contracts. Moved around a bit. Never got a permanent job. Never really wanted one. I wanted to be a writer. Teaching paid the rent. Some stand-in stuff; someone got a grant so they could get teaching relief. I was the relief. Someone went on leave, I taught their courses. Whatever came up. Then I wrote a bestseller, didn’t I? Won prizes. Sold U. K. and U. S. rights. Off I went. Thought I was set for life.’

‘And were you?’

‘It could have been worse. At least I got out before the academic world killed me. And the freelance market was still thriving, I was picking up a fair bit of work. A trap really, a distraction from the novels, but it paid well. Too well. But it was fine for a few years. Till the papers started to close down and cut back and the money dried up. So the freelance market started to shrink. Terminal contraction. Getting harder and harder to make a crust. Which is why I’ve been applying for funding.’

‘Do you think the university might have a bearing on why you might have ended up on a file? Rather than your writing?’

‘You’re saying my books are unimportant?’

‘No.’

‘Insignificant.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Irrelevant.’

‘No,’ Plant said. ‘It’s just that the university situation might have been more sensitive. It might have been why you were targeted.’

‘Corrupting the minds of the young? Well, you’d have to think so, wouldn’t you? First thing Reagan did as governor of California was purge the state university system of all the old anti-war activists. Pay-back for the sixties and seventies. They’ve been punishing the humanities ever since. Cut their funds. Destroy their libraries. Replace them with business studies. Anyway, I got out. But yes. Could be. Why not?’

‘You’re not tempted to get back into the university.’

‘You’re joking. They wouldn’t have me. Once you’ve left and shown them you can do without them, they’ll never let you back in. Anyway, why would I want to put myself into that poisonous environment again?’

Plant sucked the bits of burnt dope from between his teeth, and swallowed them. Slater fixed him with a reasonably firm stare. Not heavy-duty interrogation standard. But firm.

‘I don’t expect you to believe me,’ he said.

‘No,’ Plant said.

‘That means you do or you don’t? Simple negatives can be quite hard to understand, surprisingly.’

‘I can believe anything.’

‘That’s not the most reassuring of responses. Suggests a somewhat tenuous grasp on reality.’

Being insulted by clients was not part of his job description, as far as Plant was concerned. Not that his clients ever seemed to feel that way. Maybe that was how they always treated staff. Treated anyone. The sort of people who needed to hire people like Plant.

Chapter 12

‘I’ve decided, fuck it,’ Slater said, ‘why worry? I’m just going to set it all down. Use it in a novel. Hard to get good plot material, so why waste something like this? Forget exposé journalism. I’ve decided to turn to crime. How about that?’

‘Oh yes,’ Plant said. What the hell was Slater going to come up with now?

‘Crime fiction. Literary fiction is dead. So they tell us. So crime it is.’

‘A popular genre,’ Plant agreed.

‘I’ve reached the stage I don’t care any more. I don’t have any ambitions. Not strong ones. I don’t have illusions. Just a handful. So, at this stage of things, what does it matter? What can they do to me now? Anyway, it won’t be now. It always takes years to get anything published. And not just with me. It always does. Talk about the law’s delays. What about publishers’ delays? No worries. That’s the way it is. So by the time I’ve finished this and done a second draft and a third draft and fiddled around and it’s been copy-edited and formatted and the rest of it, it could be five years down the track. I won’t be caring about what they do to me then. It’s not like I’m going to destroy my future. By then most of my future will be behind me. As it is now indeed. But let’s not go into that.’

‘So what are you going to be writing about?’

‘Everything you ever wanted to know about the workings of the secret state and were too afraid to ask,’ Slater said.

‘And this will be crime fiction.’

‘Indeed it will.’

‘What sort?’

‘What do you mean, what sort?’

‘You know, police procedure, country house, locked room, forensic, serial killer, cannibalism ...’

‘Not police procedure,’ Slater said. ‘That’s too complicit with the authoritarian state. Best kept away from, I’ve always felt. Look at the television shows. To film in the streets they’ve got to work with the police departments and the local mayor and the council, and those guys all get to exercise script-approval. Nothing too subversive is going to slip through them.’

‘You’re planning on being subversive.’

‘Me?’ Slater said. ‘Shouldn’t every writer? Isn’t that the point of doing it?’

‘Is it?’

‘What’s the alternative? Irrelevance. Or complicity. And irrelevance is complicity. As I might have mentioned with regard to Blokey O’Kee and Francesca Templar and Tuscan Bayes and co.’

‘Your rivals.’

‘Heavens no.’

‘Competitors.’

‘Not at all. They’re from another planet altogether.’

‘And which planet would that be?’

‘This one, possibly.’

‘So you’re some sort of alien?’

‘It tends to look that way.’

Plant nodded. An interesting thought. Not one he cared to pursue right now. Roasted marijuana not withstanding.

‘So what sort of crime fiction, then?’ he asked again.

‘What sort?’ Slater repeated. ‘Oh, I thought I’d have a go at a private-eye.’

He smiled.

Plant smiled back.

The kookaburra smiled from the tree and the sun smiled down on them all from on high.

Oh happy day.

‘Who knows what’s subversive?’ Slater said. ‘I met this Thai novelist. On the writers’ festival circuit. When I was still on the circuit. He asked me would I help him write a scene set at

university. He's got this character in a novel he's writing who's sent to a university overseas and he wanted me to help him get the details right. It's set some years back. Traditional education. When they still taught the classics. But the tutor's supposed to be left-wing. Like I said, it's set some years back. So I write it. How Milton's *Paradise Lost* was nearly banned by the censor when he wrote about a solar eclipse which 'with fear of change perplexes monarchs.' So the censor thought this might be a bit of covert old republicanism. Something perplexing monarchs.

'Anyway, I write up this tutorial, send it to him, and I get this manic call back. "You trying to get me killed?" I think he said killed. Maybe gaoled. Up to fifteen years in the slammer, apparently, if you criticise the monarchy in Thailand. A major offence. News to me. I mean, I thought the censor was being a bit hyper-sensitive back in 1660s England. Never imagined something like that could lead to a political crime today. So, you know, how many political crimes does a writer commit? Unawares. I've no idea. The whole point of being a writer is to question things. But no doubt someone knows and is keeping count.'

'So what happened to your contribution to your friend's novel?'

'I rewrote it. Can't remember what I replaced it with. Satan as imperialist, maybe.'

'So, censorship.'

'Indeed. A fact of life. Nice of you not to say self-censorship.'

'Self-censorship.'

'The whole literary establishment practices it as a way of life. That's how you get to be literary establishment. By what you don't say. By exclusion. And if you don't exclude, you're excluded.'

'And is this conscious?'

'You mean, are they aware of doing it? Or is it so culturally ingrained as to seem like the only way to go?'

'Yes.'

'Hard to tell. Hard to tell how much of any of their bullshit they believe in.'

'And if you don't go along with it?'

'You don't get published. They don't have to kill you or gaol you. They just cut you off. That's a living death. But they haven't killed you, they haven't imprisoned you, it's the free world, democracy.'

He snorted derisively.

‘But you still get your work published,’ Plant said, questioningly and at the same time reassuringly.

‘Yes. Of course. Total oblivion would be too obvious, wouldn’t it? So they give you a few breaks, trivia, to make it look like there’s no blacklist. Just enough so you sound paranoid if you say you’re blacklisted. Total blacklist is the ultimate objective, of course, but they’re smart enough not to impose it straightaway. That would look fishy, some old liberal might notice and intervene, so you still get a few publications, but fewer and fewer and in less prestigious places and they hope in the end you’ll just give up in despair and go away.’

Plant made sympathetic noises.

‘Anyway, what does it matter whether you get published or not ultimately? The important thing is the writing. The satisfaction of writing. Would I be more satisfied if what I wrote made millions or if it made nothing? What difference would it make to the satisfaction of writing it? And without the satisfaction of writing it, what’s the point? Why write it if it doesn’t satisfy? I’ve never believed that nonsense of Dr Johnson’s, “No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.”’

‘But you’d still rather get published and paid than not.’

‘I guess so,’ Slater conceded. Though not with any great force. ‘So while we’re on the topic of publication, have you got anything to report on my standing in the world of grants and awards?’

‘Sled isn’t one of your greatest admirers.’

‘He’s not still alive, is he? Thought he would’ve succumbed to the pox years ago. Or a stroke. Is he still that frightful colour, like he’s going to have a heart attack in front of you? Yes, well, no surprises there. Might have guessed he’d be an assessor.’

‘And Jacquie ...’

‘Ah, not her too. Agent Orange. The original defoliant. Shrivels the leaves off any manuscript passing her way. She’s never been less than forthright in her dealings with me. Downright hostile and offensive. As she is to most writers, I believe. Is that it?’

‘So far. More to come, waiting to see them.’

Slater grunted.

Chapter 13

Along with the racket of the cicadas and cockatoos and noisy miners, there was the recurrent drone of outboard motors as tinnies crossed back and forth between the island and the bays and the mainland. One of them pulled up at the jetty beneath them and cut its motor. The momentary silence was replaced by the groaning of the inclinator climbing up the cliff face, and then a heavy-footed clumping. The deck quivered and shook.

'Don't worry,' Slater said, 'Celia always does this. It's to try to get me to fix the deck. She thinks it's unsafe. So she stamps on it.'

'One day,' Celia said, laden with bags and backpack, 'the whole lot is going to peel away from the house and hurtle down the cliff face and you with it.'

'Especially if you stamp like that,' Slater said.

She was big, blue-eyed and blonde, like a Saxon raider, a Viking pillager. Strong. Plant looked at the bags of grocery shopping she deposited on the deck. Definitely strong.

She took in the pair of them with a no nonsense look.

'This is Plant,' Slater said. 'This is Celia.'

They nodded at each other.

There was a phrase familiar to Plant from reading a certain sort of fiction. A woman of a certain age. But Celia was a woman of uncertain age. None the worse for that. Thirties. Forties. Fifties. How could you ever know? Would you ever know? She inspired that sort of question. Audacity they used to call it, as far as Plant remembered. The eternal challenge you had to rise to. Couldn't stop yourself inquiring.

Quality product. Healthy look. Good colour. No obvious breathing problems. No mobility issues. Looked good, too. Though that was the sort of thing you had to be careful about registering these days. Tricky not registering it, too, that could get you into trouble. And she was clearly up for it. Trouble.

'So what have you been telling Mr Plant?' she asked.

'Everything,' Slater said.

'Oh Gawd,' she said.

She smiled at Plant. 'Ah well, I suppose it goes with the job.'

'Of being a writer?' Plant asked.

‘Your job.’

‘Ah,’ Plant said. ‘I suppose it does. Though generally you find you haven’t been told everything.’

‘Fancy that,’ she said.

‘The unreliable narrator,’ Slater said.

‘All narrator’s are unreliable,’ she said. ‘Like all poets are liars.’

‘Well, that certainly gets that straight,’ Slater said.

Celia lifted the bags of shopping inside.

‘Big, strong woman,’ Slater said appreciatively. ‘Pioneer stock. Essential if you’re living somewhere like this. Strong opinions, too.’

‘And are they essential?’ Plant asked.

‘Non-negotiable,’ Celia said, coming back out.

She fixed an eagle eye on Slater.

‘Why are you sitting out there like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘With your pants on in the sun. Have you aired your groin today?’

She turned to Plant and smiled.

‘The disgusting old toad has developed jock itch,’ she announced. She abandoned the smile and pursed her lips in distaste. ‘His doctor’s told him sunlight is the best cure. He’s supposed to be sunning the family jewels if he’s going to sit out there.’

‘I don’t have that exhibitionistic eagerness to go bottomless that you and your sisterhood have for going topless,’ Slater said, not quite epigrammatically. The phrasing need a bit of tightening up.

Celia looked at him and then at Plant. Took a breath. Smiled again. And took off her t-shirt. Bared all. Topless indeed. Then she turned and headed indoors.

‘She used to be a performance artist,’ Slater said. ‘Well, I guess she still is.’

Was that the full show, Plant wondered, or just a curtain raiser? He waited. After that it was something of an anti-climax. Just the sound of the water-pump and the shower. She finally emerged, clad in towels, and disappeared into a bedroom. Slater rabbited on for a while and Plant looked out at the water. She did not reappear.

‘I guess I’d better be leaving,’ Plant said eventually.

‘Your choice entirely,’ Slater said, with an indolent gesture of his hand.

Plant took it as a farewell wave, and left.

Plant pondered over the incident, quite often, as he drove around or ate meals. Or indeed as he did pretty well anything. Which was as little as he could get by on, generally. But he didn’t stint on pondering. He did a lot of that. There was clearly a message. Or if not clearly, presumably. But what? Lasciviousness? Ever hopeful. Maybe. But maybe the question was not so much what the message was, as to whom it was addressed. Plant accepted that he may not have been the intended recipient. Despite all his best pondering. And with regret. The intended audience was pretty well certainly Slater. Plant was just the chorus, any old chorus, to wind Slater up. Unless he got his rocks off seeing his missus taking off her t-shirt in front of other guys. Or another guy, singular. Maybe he did. Maybe she was humouring him. Turning him on. Soaping up in the shower afterwards to prepare for her own satisfaction. Possibly. But more likely, Plant figured, after all that pondering, the message was directed at Slater and announced something quite simple. Like ‘Get fucked.’ Or ‘Up yours.’ Something confronting, anyway. Though, he pondered on, you could never be totally sure, that vision before him again, maybe after all there was a conscious air of lasciviousness about it, even if not one carrying an invitation. Or maybe it did.

Chapter 14

‘He’s pretty full on paranoid,’ Plant said, back at Chateau Fullalove.

‘He always was.’

‘He even reckoned his books were contaminated with some mind-altering depressant.’

‘Classic,’ Fullalove said.

‘You think that’s delusional?’

‘Could be. Could be true. Doesn’t really matter.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It doesn’t really make any difference,’ Fullalove said. ‘It has the same effect whether it’s true or not. He believes it’s true and that has the desired effect.’

‘What desired effect?’

‘Driving him mad, basically.’

Plant thought for a moment.

‘So you’re saying that was the intention.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘So he wasn’t delusional. He was being driven paranoid.’

‘Could be. Either by chemicals or by being persuaded by someone that there were chemicals poisoning him, even if there weren’t.’

‘Who would have persuaded him, then?’

‘Whoever he talked to about it, presumably.’

‘Why?’

‘Government policy.’

‘What’s government policy?’

‘Instilling a climate of fear. The way to control people. UFOs. Nuclear war. Climate change. Pension funds collapsing. Avian flu. Swine flu. Volcanoes. Earthquakes. Tsunamis. Terrorists. Blacklists. The theatre of the absurd.’

‘You’re not saying the government’s triggering earthquakes and tsunamis just to frighten us.’

‘Could be,’ Fullalove said. ‘Not inconceivable. There was a story I read somewhere that the Americans were experimenting with nuclear explosions on fault lines to trigger remote earthquakes. But there are probably enough natural disasters for their purposes. Built up by the media. All they need to do is show footage to instil fear. Television news. Internet. Image banks. They keep re-running the highlights. Same old clips. Planes flying into buildings. Interesting how they had cameras in place for when it happened.’

Plant ran his eyes along Fullalove’s bookshelves. Conspiracies and corruption and more conspiracies and corruption.

‘These theories of yours ...’

‘It’s not a theory.’

‘Yeah, well, whatever it is, it certainly isn’t contributing to the reduction of fear.’

‘You reckon?’

‘It just adds to the general paranoia.’

‘Up to you how you see it,’ Fullalove said. ‘To me it’s just the way the world is. Best to know. Like having a good map. That way you get fewer surprises. So you don’t take too much notice of all the shit they’re pumping out.’

Chapter 15

It took Plant the best part of a month to get to see the grant-givers and assessors and committee members and public intellectuals who would agree to see him. Not all would. And it was not just a matter of identifying them and tracking them down, but of pinning them down. Some had no time, can we do it by phone? Some wanted to make a day of it, stretch a meeting over coffee to a lunch, eager, even desperate, for company. Some were out of town, back in a couple of weeks, some out of the country for the year. Some were busy, or said they were, telling him to make an appointment, but not next week, nor the next. It dragged on. Cancellations. Changes of plan.

Ted Kelly answered the door of his Surry Hills terrace in crumpled kimono, barefooted, unshaven, hair dishevelled. Maybe he had been about to have a bath. Smarten up. Get it together. And now Plant had interrupted the impetus. It could take days to get motivated again.

‘Come in. I was just having a coffee,’ he said.

The smell of freshly ground coffee intermingled with the smell of freshly smoked marijuana from the joint in the ashtray.

‘Don’t see many of those,’ Plant said, ‘these days.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Ashtrays.’

‘Help yourself to a smoke,’ Kelly said, generously, indicating the joint.

‘Not right now, thanks,’ Plant said, thoughts of saliva and HIV and Hep C and herpes simplex running through his fears. So he was subject to raging paranoia too. So he was still alive.

‘Coffee?’

‘Coffee. Black. Two sugars.’

‘Might want to make it three if it’s black.’

‘Three,’ agreed Plant.

‘Except I’ve only got honey.’

‘Honey will do.’

‘It’s free range,’ Kelly assured him.

‘Whatever.’

‘Slater? Haven’t seen him for years. Nor spoken to him. Last time I spoke to him was on the phone. I was back in Sydney. I phoned him to say hello. You know. Old friends. Shared interests. “I’m in Sydney,” I said. He said, “I’m busy.” “Oh,” I said, “I’m here for a few weeks.” “I’m busy,” he said. Then he hung up. That was it. End of conversation.’

‘What did you make of that?’

‘Terminal paranoia. Bad trip.’

‘He tripped?’

‘Many a time. And fell.’

‘Fell where?’

‘Down the rabbit hole. Lost to view.’

‘And that was it?’

‘That was it. Final curtain. Where are they now?’

‘Where are who?’

‘The actors in our little play. The golden youths of promise. Burned to ashes everywhere. Without even an incandescent glow. Just snuffed out.’

He strummed a chord or two on an imaginary guitar. In an imaginary concert. Entertainment Centre packed to capacity. Groupies and dope waiting backstage.

‘Those were the days,’ he said. Blinking in the light of contemporaneity.

‘Sad,’ Plant said.

‘I wasn’t offended.’

‘I guess we all have our moments.’

‘Moments,’ Kelly said reflectively. ‘The paranoid imagination is no stranger to me. Make my living from it. Not much of a living really. More of a vocation. But it fills up the time.’

‘And you didn’t see him again?’

‘After that I went to India. I had this idea to solve the mystery of the universe by a mathematical formula. That was when I started hearing voices. Talking to the Lord. Then I

thought it was the CIA sending me messages. Or I could've been going mad. Or it could've been the ganja. Or all of them for that matter. You never know, do you? You've got all these possibilities and you never know what it's all about. Just suspicions. Memories. A haunted house resonating with old conversations.'

'And you didn't try to call him after that?'

'No point. I mean, I wasn't upset. I thought it was quite funny. I dined out on the story a few times. Good story. It was the succinctness. But you know. I had my own issues to worry about. Slater doesn't have a monopoly on fucking up. He's not the only member of the Monopeds.'

'Who are they?'

'The club of the one-footed. People who've shot themselves in the foot. Or lost a leg after scoring an own goal. The walking wounded of the cultural industries. The reserve army of the creative industrial poor. Waiting our turn beside our begging bowl.'

He looked the part, bare-footed, begging bowl full of ash.

He rolled another smoke and handed it across to Plant, lit it for him with a trembling hand.

'Hang on to it,' Kelly said.

Plant hung on to it.

'Let me tell you something. Slater's gone paranoid because he believes there's a blacklist. Of course there's one. Why's he so surprised? How does he think the system operates? He's not the only one.'

'The only what?'

'The only writer no-one wants to publish. There's too much product. Too many talented people. The system doesn't need them. It doesn't have room for that many. Cruel. But that's the way it is. A cruel system. As Slater tried to point out. Which doesn't help his situation.'

He took what was left of the joint from Plant.

'Welcome to the world of the marginalised.'

'But weren't you on the assessment panel for that state award he applied for and didn't get?'

'Sure. They bring you in from the cold. Makes you think you're not on the outside any more. You're one of a dozen on the panel. You can't do anything useful. Just a lone voice.

Outvoted every time, pretty well. And it doesn't help you. Me. Just makes the people who didn't get funding hate me. They find out I was on the panel. And I still don't get funding either. Clever old system.'

'Were Slater's political views ever an issue?' Plant asked, waving the proffered joint aside on its return.

'Never mentioned,' Kelly said. 'No need to. They have him down as writing about dope. Unreliable, consequently.'

'What about his books?'

'Everybody who applies has got books.'

'But did Slater's books sell?'

'Probably not. Depends whether the publisher made an effort. Or just left them to die like foundlings. Easily done.'

'How?'

'Well, to start with if you want to sell anything you need to have to have a publicist. Who gets on the phone. Gets you interviews, television, reviews, radio. And a marketing person who gets it into the stores. K-Mart. Big W. Target. Alternatively, they just do nothing to market your books and after six months they pulp them. Makes a good tax write off against the money they're making from imported product. Makes them more money that way than actually selling them, probably. All a matter of accounting.'

'And Slater's books?'

'Same with all our books. Nothing.'

'You sound as jaundiced as Slater.'

'It's all right. You can say paranoid.'

'Paranoid, then.'

'It's not paranoia,' Kelly said. 'It's just seeing the way business is done. Or not done. Institutional practice. He tried to fight it.'

'Fight it?'

'He was a hustler. You mightn't notice it unless you worked with him. And if you knew him, he made sure you worked with him. For him. He saw it as with him, of course. But it was for him. Or to be fair, for his writing. He didn't go for personal publicity. But if he could hustle a deal, get someone to get a magazine going, get someone to put on a reading, get someone to co-

edit a book – if there was half a chance he'd be onto them. So if he could use you, he'd see you. Good company. But focussed. He didn't hang out with the chattering classes, which was a mistake. Didn't go to Sled's weekly lunches. Didn't take the social side seriously enough. He didn't like that world, the arts bureaucrats and festival committee people and rich people, and he didn't allow for the amount of power they had. They thought he was arrogant and dismissive and superior to them. Well, he was. It was the work for him, and if the work wasn't there or he thought it wasn't any good, he wasn't interested in the people. And those people resented that. So, payback time.'

'And that's all it was?'

'That was enough.'

'But not political.'

'Oh, shit, yes, it was political. He hated them all. The idle rich. He still came out with those old phrases. Rootless cosmopolitans. Not that he was ever a political theorist. Not his thing. I mean, he knew some of the left, but he was never at ease with them. They were too philistine. No interest in cultural production. And like I said, he liked to get things done – get articles out or books published. He soon gave up on people who just talked about doing things. Unless of course the talk was interesting. Then he'd keep in touch with them. Trouble is, he couldn't help being confrontational. Editors and publishers included. Sometimes it was political hostility. Sometimes he thought they were incompetent, and he told them so. Stupid. No taste. Well, he was right. On all counts. But it didn't do him any favours, saying it.'

Chapter 16

'Slater?' Blokey O'Kee said. 'Why on earth do you want to talk about him?'

He stopped, his face aghast.

'You're not writing a book about him?'

Plant let the moment rest, cruelly, Blokey O'Kee's agony extended there.

'Or an article? Or did he die? Don't tell me you're writing an obituary. Hardly worth it. No one remembers him.'

'Except you.'

‘Me?’ Blokey O’Kee said. ‘Ah, you mean my *Chronicles*.’

Plant didn’t.

‘Your chronic ills?’ he tried.

‘My diaries. Published a few years ago. I do mention him a couple of times. For the historical record. The sort of idiotic things people like him used to say.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, some dinner party, he was boring everyone stupid. Saying literary theory was like al-Qaeda. The Americans had armed the academics with literary theory in order to drive left-wing criticism out of the universities. Like they armed the Mujahedin to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. And now they were stuck with it and it was destroying their whole culture. Like they did with the twin towers. Except of course he didn’t believe al-Qaeda destroyed the twin towers.’

‘Who did he think did?’

‘Oh, the CIA, of course. With the help of the Pentagon.’

‘And the CIA armed the academics with literary theory?’

‘You don’t believe me, do you? You think I’m making it up.’

‘No,’ Plant said, ‘I don’t think you’re making it up.’

‘That was the sort of thing he said,’ O’Kee said. ‘Still does, I imagine.’

‘Pretty much,’ Plant agreed.

‘You’ve spoken to him?’

‘Listened to him,’ Plant agreed.

‘He goes on,’ O’Kee said. ‘Remorselessly.’

‘And you wrote it down.’

‘Let me give you a copy,’ O’Kee said, with the unfeigned eagerness of the remaindered author, boxes of unsold books beneath the bed. He scurried out of the room and reappeared waving a copy of his *Chronicles*. Held high above any milling crowd. A good clear photo opportunity. He took a fountain pen from his jacket pocket and began the flourish of an author’s signing. Sleeve pulled back, fly leaf pressed down, the O’Kee autograph inscribed.

‘That’s very generous of you,’ Plant said, dishonestly. He knew the value of remaindered books.

O’Kee beamed.

‘It’s just a sample,’ he said modestly.

‘A sample?’ Plant envisaged another eleven volumes. A boxed set. An unopened carton in mint condition.

‘A taster,’ O’Kee said. ‘To whet the appetite.’

‘So there’s more.’

It wasn’t a question but O’Kee bounded out of the room. Plant looked at the book in his hands. It announced itself as a diary. Less an appointments book than a sequence of transcripts of business completed. Replicated conversations. The wit and wisdom of Blokey O’Kee. Along with assorted idiocies of his contemporaries, portrayed in a bad light.

O’Kee re-emerged with a stack of large, bulky ledgers. Heavy duty stuff. Bound in some dead animal’s skin. Gold lettering numbering them on the spines. Roman numerals, natch. He placed them on a table and opened a couple to show Plant. Diaries. Handwritten. Dated entries filling page after page.

‘Plenty more where they come from,’ O’Kee said, nodding to indicate the book in Plant’s hands. ‘That’s just a selection.’

‘And is there more of Slater?’

O’Kee looked pained.

‘I hope not,’ he said.

‘Not one of your closest and dearest.’

‘Just someone I bumped into round the traps.’

Plant nodded. Was it just an outmoded colloquialism? Or was O’Kee indicating his gamekeeper role, checking the springes for poachers, caught in the man-traps he’d laid, destined for trial and transportation.

‘But this is a fair sample?’

O’Kee beamed agreement.

‘How long have you been keeping a diary?’

O’Kee beamed some more.

‘Since I was eighteen.’

‘Like from university.’

‘From final year at school,’ he said.

‘What got you started?’

‘One of my schoolmasters.’

‘An assignment?’

O’Kee hesitated.

‘He saw I had talent. He tried to encourage it. He said if you want to be a writer, there are certain things you should do.’

‘So you did them.’

O’Kee smiled again. He patted the stack of bound ledgers. So much more impressive than the printed selection. They had a *gravitas* that the look of the published paperback could not emulate. The historic record of a continuing endeavour. Like something from the bureaucracies of the Code Napoleon or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. *La police des Ecrivains*. Before the days of electronic surveillance. The ledger is kept. Table talk. Loose lips.

Plant shuddered.

‘You record everything?’ he asked.

‘Well, not everything, obviously,’ O’Kee said. Testily. He was one of those people entrusted with the task of saving testily from obsolescence and thence deletion from the dictionaries. ‘There wouldn’t be time to live if you wrote down everything. You’d be writing all day and half the night.’

‘I guess it would depend on your life-style,’ Plant said. ‘I mean, is all this ...’ – he gestured at the bound ledgers – ‘private solitary reflection on the meaning of existence? Or is it dinner party conversations? I imagine the latter is more saleable. The gossip. Or perhaps not,’ he added quickly, as O’Kee’s expression took on the look of the affronted. ‘Depends on who was at dinner, I suppose. Compared with the inwardness of your solitary reflections. I guess there’s a place for both.’

‘Yes,’ O’Kee said.

‘Incidentally,’ Plant found himself saying, ‘what is the meaning of existence?’

‘Read the book,’ O’Kee instructed.

‘Oh, of course,’ Plant said. He smiled. ‘I look forward to it.’

O’Kee nodded, as if he expected no less. Or he could have been expecting the unimaginable, but nodded to keep up appearances.

‘So this is like a record of every dinner party, book launch, poetry reading, theatre first night, restaurant and pub conversation since you were eighteen. Who said what. Wit and wisdom of the literati.’

‘Yes,’ O’Kee said. All smiles again. Approaching the smug. ‘Except when I imbibed too freely and remembered nothing.’

‘That’s what they all say,’ Plant said.

‘Who says?’

‘It’s just an expression,’ Plant said. He had no idea why he said it. These sorts of statements had begun slipping out more and more frequently. Unbidden. It was as if some trip switch had stopped working in his brain and his larynx. People like O’Kee seemed to provoke it. Maybe that was how O’Kee got his diary material. Provoking people into unguarded utterance. It wasn’t a system failure in Plant’s brain or larynx after all. But some psychological trick O’Kee had been trained in. Or some taser-like device he possessed.

Chapter 17

Celia phoned.

‘This is Celia.’

‘Who?’ Plant said.

‘Celia. We met. With Slater.’

‘Slater,’ Plant said. ‘Ah, yes. Of course. Celia.’

It came back to him. In full three-dimensional colour. Widescreen.

‘I need to talk to you.’

‘Sure,’ Plant said. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Not on the phone.’

‘Ah,’ Plant said. That all too familiar routine.

‘What?’

It might have sounded like aargh to her.

‘No, nothing,’ Plant said. ‘That’s cool. You want me to come up there?’

‘No,’ she said.

‘No.’

‘No fucking way.’

‘That’s cool,’ Plant said again. ‘So where?’

‘Are you in the city?’

‘Sort of,’ Plant said.

‘Can you get to Leichhardt? How about the Bar Italia?’

‘How about it?’

‘Then I can have a gelato.’

‘Hard to get a good gelato,’ Plant said. The connoisseur of everything. ‘You won’t be disappointed.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘That’s why I suggested it.’

Last time he had seen her she had been half naked. But she was fully clothed in the Bar Italia. Pretty much. A fair bit of cleavage with the top buttons of her shirt undone. Hardly mattered, given the diaphanous transparency of the fabric. It quite made Plant throb. Every organ and then some.

She tucked into the chocolate and macadamia gelato with the enthusiasm and confidence of the hereditarily slim. Trim, anyway. Not at all gaunt. Far from it. A fair bit of glowing, solid flesh, fit, strong. Plant found the whole ensemble most stimulating.

She smiled at him. It would have melted many a gelato. It melted Plant.

‘I’m worried about Slater,’ she said, reaching a spare hand across the table and grasping Plant’s wrist, the other hand holding onto the gelato-laden spoon. Plant throbbed.

‘What’s he told you?’ she asked.

The throbbing subsided somewhat.

‘Nothing much,’ Plant said. It sounded unconvincing. He could have claimed client confidentiality, but undoubtedly that would have been badly received.

‘I’m his partner, for Pete’s sake.’

‘I know.’

‘I don’t want him to go and get himself killed working on this stupid book.’

‘What book?’

‘The book he’s writing.’

‘What’s it about?’

‘Some rock’n’roll group that was part of a drug syndicate.’

He sipped at his long black, all attention. There was the ambience of the Bar Italia, serious coffee drinkers, posters on the wall, *The Godfather*, *The Untouchables*, The Beatles; and outside the occasional hustle and bustle of Norton Street, the roar of aircraft approaching the airport. But he noticed none of it. He kept his eyes and attention focussed solely on Celia. He had been living alone in the bush for a long time. It seemed like a long time. That was his defence. But he needed no defence. She could do that to men. And did. Like Blokey O’Kee and his psychological taser, she had her methods. Plant could see that. He wasn’t naive. Not in that particular detail. But she could get him throbbing.

‘Circe,’ he said.

‘What?’

He gave a hog-like involuntary snort.

‘Celia,’ he tried again.

‘Yes?’

‘He hasn’t talked to me about it.’

‘That’s not why he’s seeing you?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure.’

‘It is, but you don’t realise it.’

‘So tell me. What is this book?’

‘It’s going to be a novel. He’s decided against an investigative piece.’

‘Why?’

‘He said a novel would be safer. Change a few details. Make up the names. And then make a killing from the movie rights.’ She did the imploring look. ‘The only killing that’s going to happen is to him.’

‘What sort of novel?’

‘A crime novel. That’s where you came in.’

‘Did I?’

‘Right on cue. He was going to write a private-eye novel but he didn’t know any private-eyes. He wanted to find out what they looked like and how they sounded. He’d done all the

research on the rock group. He didn't want someone saying he got the P. I. all wrong. So he asked around and settled on you.'

'Did he now?'

'It's like when I used to get hired as a life model,' she said. 'Except in my case I had to get my gear off.'

'I'm not exactly a private-eye,' Plant said. Throbbing again. He fished out a card from his wallet and gave it to her with as firm a hand as he could manage.

Research Assistance. Investigative Reporting.

'Close enough,' she said. She smiled. 'You could still get your gear off.'

'So,' he said, 'tell me ...'

She reached across towards him and held her hand up, looking over her shoulder, taking in the other tables.

'Let's go for a walk,' she said, getting up.

Plant gulped down the last of his coffee. The gelato was all gone. A hungry woman, Plant reflected.

They headed down Norton Street towards the park. Pioneers Park. The pioneers being the dead buried in the cemetery that the park used to be. They walked on the turf above them.

'He's writing about this rock group. Smackaroo. They were big. And they were mixed up with this drug ring, bringing heroin in. The whole thing was a heroin operation. Laundering the profits through the band.'

'At least they were running a band,' Plant said. 'A bit of cultural subsidy. Like the banks putting sculpture in their foyers. Sounds like they were onto a good thing. Wealthy patrons.'

'I don't know if the band knew what was going on. I don't know much about it. And I don't want to, to be honest. But he's decided this is going to be his next book.'

'So ...' Plant said.

It left it open to her. But she just repeated it.

'So?'

With a question mark.

'It's not what he wanted to see me about,' Plant said.

'So?' she repeated.

‘So I’m not sure what you want me to do.’

Was ‘want’ the right word? How about ‘expect’? Did she expect him to do something? She said nothing.

‘I’m not in any position to tell him not to go ahead with it. The book.’

‘Why not?’

‘What do you mean “Why not?” It’s none of my business, is it?’

‘So you’ll just stand by and watch him get himself killed.’

He couldn’t think of a positive answer to that. Neither yes nor no.

‘Can’t you tell him it’s dangerous?’

‘I imagine he knows that.’

‘He’s been in enough shit. He doesn’t need this as well.’

‘What shit in particular?’

‘All the political shit he got himself into.’

‘What sort of politics?’

‘The wrong sort. Obviously.’

‘And what happened?’

‘He thinks he got himself blacklisted, doesn’t he? But at least he hasn’t got himself killed. But now he’s planning on writing about the international fucking ramifications of the drug trade, he’s asking for trouble. Serious trouble.’

‘So you believe him.’

‘Believe him?’

‘About the blacklist and so on.’

‘Of course I believe him. Why wouldn’t I?’

Because most people would think it sounded crazy, that’s why: but he didn’t say it.

‘I’ll have a think about it.’

She snorted derisively.

‘Don’t take too long,’ she said. ‘Otherwise your employer will be dead and you’ll be out of a job.’

She was clearly a hit ’em where it hurts girl. Straight for the bottom line. The economic base.

Chapter 18

The arrangement was that Plant would report back to Slater within the month. It was not a matter of desperate urgency, and it wasn't something that could be hurried. Just talking to people. Easy enough except for when it came to pinning them down to a time and place amidst their other commitments and appointments and diversions. A month seemed reasonable.

They'd settled on a date and Plant had written it into his diary. He didn't phone to confirm the day before. The less phone traffic the better. His principle, Slater's principle. And he wasn't a dentist or an acupuncturist offering reminder calls. He was doing the visiting and he preferred to turn up unannounced. That way there was always the chance that people would be unprepared. Clients included.

He took the ferry across to the island, cormorants and seagulls providing the wildlife, the fairy penguins and eagle off for the day. The ferry pulled up at the wharf amidst a cluster of jellyfish. He climbed the hundred and sixty something steps, once again losing count of how many there were, and turned along the track. A couple of magpies fossicked around ahead of him. A banded rail darted from one side to the other, disappearing in a tangle of lantana. A kookaburra called out. And no doubt a myriad of other creatures noticed him. Mosquitoes, lizards, ticks, pythons, black snakes, bush rats, funnel-web spiders, insomniac possums. He was still listing the possibilities when he came to the police crime-scene tape across the entrance to Slater's property. He ducked beneath it and walked down to the house.

'Hey, you! Where do you think you're going?'

It was the voice of the law. Not necessarily unmistakable. But given the blue and white tape, a fair deduction.

'I'm visiting James Slater,' Plant answered.

'Are you now?'

One of those policemen with shaven head, trousers tucked into heavy boots, and an assortment of what seemed to be offensive weaponry hanging from his belt.

'That's the plan.'

'Well, you might have to change it. Who did you say you were visiting?'

'James Slater.'

‘And who did you say you were?’

‘I didn’t,’ Plant said. But he dug out one of his cards and handed it over. Always good to find a use for them.

‘Wait there,’ said the policeman, turning and entering the house. He returned with a policeman in somewhat less combative gear. Shoes rather than boots. Pressed trousers rather than quasi-overalls. They ran through the routine again. Who are you? What are you doing? The usual civilities.

‘So what’s happening?’ Plant asked.

‘We ask the questions.’

‘Go ahead,’ Plant said, all cooperation.

The policeman looked momentarily stymied. Momentarily.

‘Is Slater in?’ Plant asked, seizing the opportunity.

‘What’s your business with him?’ asked the policeman in pressed trousers. He was the one who asked the questions.

Plant could have answered none of your business. But politeness seemed a better option. The booted constable looked eager to practice some crowd control. Try out his taser a few times.

‘I’m doing some work for him.’

‘What sort of work?’

‘Research,’ Plant said.

‘Oh yes.’

Plant nodded.

‘And would you like to tell us what sort of research?’

Plant smiled.

‘Sure,’ he said. It didn’t seem the occasion to plead client confidentiality. ‘Basically I was checking out his standing in the literary community.’

‘And what is his standing?’

‘Mixed,’ Plant had to say.

‘Enemies?’

And though he had managed to sustain denial this far, this was the point at which he had to surrender.

‘Has something happened to him?’

‘Why would you ask that?’

‘From the way you asked about enemies.’

‘Which you didn’t answer.’

‘Oh, sure, well some people disagreed with his views and lifestyle.’

‘Which are?’

‘You’d have to ask him.’

‘Unfortunately that isn’t going to be possible.’

‘What’s happened.’

‘There’s been an incident.’

Incident, Plant registered, not accident.

‘What sort of incident?’

‘You knew him well?’

‘No,’ Plant said, ‘we’d met a couple of times, that’s all.’

‘Come in,’ said the policeman.

They entered the kitchen.

‘Sit down,’ said the policeman.

Plant sat at the kitchen table.

‘Wait here while I get an officer to take your statement.’

‘Statement?’ Plant said. ‘Why do I have to give a statement?’

‘There’s been an incident.’

‘What sort of incident?’

‘That’s what we’re investigating, sir,’ said the policeman.

And then Celia came into the kitchen.

‘You!’ she said.

Plant offered a ‘Hello’.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I had a meeting with Slater.’

‘He’s dead,’ she said. ‘He went over the deck. That fucking rail must have given way like I kept telling him it would. I came home and found him lying on the rocks.’

He would have offered consolation, an arm around the shoulders. But in the circumstances, the shaven-headed policeman hovering beside them, hyped up for action, jiggling

from foot to foot with eagerness or amphetamines, consolation might have been misconstrued. A cool, professional distance seemed best. It was none of his business, he told himself, and it was best kept that way. But he knew that it wasn't going to be like that. Like it or not, whatever business it was, he was part of it now.

The policeman with pressed trousers came back in with a young woman constable.

'She'll take your statement,' he said, and steered Celia out of the kitchen before Plant could offer any condolences, or, indeed, anything at all.

Chapter 19

Plant handed the policewoman his card. She took it but still made him spell out his name and address. It made him feel under suspicion. It was an unpleasant feeling, designed to put him, or anyone else, at a disadvantage.

'And why were you visiting here?' she asked.

He had already decided it mightn't be a good idea to say none of your business. So he didn't. He was about to say, 'Just visiting,' but that would only have provoked further questions.

'I was doing some work for Slater,' he said.

And then he had to explain what sort of work.

'Interviewing some people.'

'What about?'

It was going to sound strange however he told it. It was beginning to sound strange to Plant.

'He'd been knocked back for some project funding. He wanted to know why. Whether the people making the decisions had some negative feelings towards him.'

'Negative feelings,' she said.

However he phrased it, it wasn't going to sound good.

'And did they?' she asked.

'Some did, some didn't.'

'What sort of negative feelings?'

'Oh, political prejudice mainly. Life-style disapproval,' he added, diluting it a little.

‘Politics,’ she said.

Plant nodded as if to agree. Oh, politics.

‘And what were his politics?’

‘I don’t really know,’ Plant said.

‘You don’t really know.’

Her contempt and disbelief were undisguised. Disbelief that he didn’t know, contempt that he should imagine he would get away with that.

‘Some people that I spoke to seemed to think he was an old lefty. But they were the sort of right-wingers who think that about a lot of people.’

‘So he was a subversive.’

And now they would be bringing in special branch and an anti-terrorist team.

‘I don’t know, I wouldn’t think so,’ Plant said. No doubt unconvincingly.

‘But you were working for him.’

‘He’d only just hired me. I hardly knew him.’

She gave him that look that police were so good at. He refused to flinch. Crunched hard on his fillings.

‘And you just happen to turn up the day after he’s found dead.’

‘He’d arranged the date a month ago.’

‘And then the day before, he’s found dead.’

Plant shrugged.

‘What were you about to tell him?’

‘Not a lot,’ Plant said. ‘Some people thought he was O. K., some didn’t.’

‘We’ll need names,’ she said.

‘Sure.’

‘So can we have them?’

He named names. Without much compunction. She wrote them down.

‘Would it have been in anyone’s interest that whatever you had to report shouldn’t reach him?’

It was something he had already been wondering.

‘Seems unlikely,’ he said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘No,’ he conceded. ‘I can’t see why anybody would worry. But the timing ...’

‘The timing?’

‘Well, it’s odd, isn’t it?’

She didn’t answer.

‘How well did you know him?’

‘I didn’t really. I’d only met him twice.’

‘And his partner?’

‘Same thing.’

‘Same thing?’

‘I didn’t know her either.’

‘But you’ve met her.’

‘Yes, briefly.’

‘How often?’

‘Just a couple of times.’

‘Was he a drinker?’

‘Not that I noticed.’

‘Did he have any enemies?’

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said. It didn’t sound convincing. ‘Probably,’ he conceded. It was hard to deny it convincingly.

‘You don’t know. But you think he probably did.’

‘I told you, I hardly knew him. But from talking to him I got the impression he had strong opinions which might have upset some people, maybe. He was combative.’

‘Violent?’

‘No, not physically. Intellectually. He liked to take provocative positions. He was a writer. So he could have got up certain people’s noses.’

‘Like who?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Plant said.

‘Was he depressed?’

‘Not that I could see.’

‘You said he’d been refused funding.’

‘Yes. But he was more pissed off than depressed about it.’

‘Angry?’

‘Annoyed.’

‘Was he planning on taking action?’

‘I don’t know. We hadn’t got that far. He just asked me to find out what the assessors thought about him.’

‘But when you found out that information he might have taken action.’

‘I don’t know. I’d told him some stuff a while back and I was reporting on the rest today. I just turned up here as arranged, and found all this.’

He gestured around, the situation.

‘Coincidentally.’

‘I guess so,’ Plant said. ‘Seems odd, I agree. But I can’t see why.’

‘You can’t see why it’s odd?’

‘I can’t see any connection between my coming here and what’s happened. I don’t even know what happened. How did he die? Celia said the rail gave way.’

‘I can’t say,’ she said.

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘We’re still making inquiries.’

‘But he’s dead.’

‘Oh yes, he’s dead.’

‘But you can’t say how.’

‘He was found on the rocks below the deck. Whether he fell or the rail gave way or ...’

‘Or he was pushed.’

‘You have reason to suggest that?’ she asked.

‘Not at all,’ he said, though even as he spoke he wondered, maybe he did have reason to suggest that, something lurking there below consciousness, some murky, repressed thought. ‘I was just adding to the list of possibilities.’

‘And you think that is a possibility.’

Plant looked at her. Cold, hard, impassive. Quite attractive, really.

‘Yes,’ he said, fixing her icy blue eyes, ‘I think it’s a possibility.’

‘We may need to speak to you again,’ she said.

‘No problem,’ Plant said. ‘You’ve got my card,’ he could have added. But didn’t.

Plant was shaken. It was not like losing an old friend. As he kept telling the police, he had only met Slater a couple of times, he hardly knew him. But there had been something about the man that Plant had liked. He would have liked to have got to know him better. And that was not something Plant felt about many of the people he encountered. But Slater had had something that was appealing. A lack of pretence. Not exactly straightforward. There were clearly aspects that were not straightforward; or, if not clearly, at least the suggestions were there. But lack of straightforwardness could have many causes. Caution. Calculation. It did not necessarily equate with bullshit. It was not like listening to public broadcasting; nor commercial broadcasting. There had been something about Slater that had rung true. And that was not something that generally characterised writers or so-called public intellectuals.

Slater anyway had not been that public. His by-line had not been gracing the press that much. Not that there was a lot of press left to grace. The weeklies had vanished. The broadsheets were mutating into tabloids. And the tabloids seemed substantially advertorial, promoting celebrities from other media, and offering just sufficient political disinformation to retain government advertising. For whatever reason Slater's name was not in the forefront of the attention of the chattering classes, neither as commentator nor topic. Amidst the swelling crowd of retrenched and redundant journalists and media hacks, one more marginalised figure was just one of the many. And now he was one who was never going to be making a comeback.

And that shook Plant. One thing about Slater had been his refusal to surrender. He still had his plans, his projected books, that he believed in. He hadn't given up. Plant, no stranger to the lures of despair, had found Slater's ongoing commitment admirable.

And was that what had got him killed?

Got him killed. Plant faltered. Speculating away as he drove back into the city through the Wakehurst Parkway, amidst the gums and wattles and palms. He listened to himself. Ran it by again. Got him killed. So his unconscious had already ruled out natural causes, accident, or suicide. Something had got Slater killed. It was a realisation that did not come as a shock. It was something he had known all along, not just a possibility. He had stood there at the house inside the crime-scene tape. He had never considered for a moment that it was not a crime-scene, that the tape and police presence were inappropriate. They were totally appropriate. Precisely what

was to be expected. Even if he had not registered it at the time, standing there, being questioned, he had nonetheless known it without a doubt. Slater had been murdered.

And not randomly. It was not a case of collateral damage. It was not a case of mass poisoning nor a drive-by shooting. Slater had been targeted and murdered. And murdered for a reason. After he had hired Plant. But because he had hired Plant? The unconscious was still out on that one.

Chapter 20

'Unemployed again,' Fullalove observed.

Plant had learned the hard way that restricting your acquaintance only to people whose expressions, demeanour, cultural taste, morality, ethics and politics were inoffensive to you could result in your becoming a very lonely person. Plant had been a very lonely person. Until he had begun to learn tolerance. He had taught himself to accept arrant crassness, crudity, megalomania, self-preoccupation and utter selfishness as amusing character traits, invaluable and unforgettable contributions to the daily theatre of life. See it all as theatre. Or a waxworks. Whatever would keep it sufficiently at an uninvolving distance to avoid the spontaneous visceral response of nausea or irritation or anger or fear. Treat it as part of the book of nature, supplementary volume, *Homo sapiens*.

'Being out of a job was not my first thought,' he said. It sounded pompous. 'He was a nice guy,' he added, give it the human touch.

'You miss him,' Fullalove said.

'I don't miss him. I hardly knew him.'

'No problem then.'

But there was a problem. As Fullalove perceived. And spelled out.

'Of course now that your client's dead you don't have an income stream to pay you to find out who did it. Unless the fair Celia coughs up. But she might have her reasons not to.'

'And what does that mean?'

'*Cherchez la femme*,' Fullalove said.

'Go on.'

‘Most murders occur within the domestic circle.’

‘Do they?’

‘They do. Well known fact.’

‘You don’t know her. You haven’t even met her. We don’t even know that it wasn’t an accident.’

Fullalove made tut-tutting noises. It sounded as if he had ill-fitting false teeth.

‘Touchy, are we? Fancy the lady, do we? “One gaze into her lustrous eyes and he was persuaded that she could never be a killer. It was a misjudgement he was to regret.”’

‘Look,’ Plant said, ‘given that Slater was about to write a book about the drug trade, I’d’ve thought that might have merited consideration. Who is his killer more likely to be? A drug syndicate or the woman he’s living with?’

‘His missus,’ Fullalove said. ‘How do you know he wasn’t bonking some bimbo, and the bimbos’ partner or the lustrous Celia decided that that wasn’t on and he had to go? So one or both of them pushes him off the deck the day before he’s got a meeting with you. Knowing that that would be of interest to the cops. Muddy the waters. Makes it look like whatever he was up to with you is part of the plot. Must be other suspects, why else would he be seeing a private investigator? Which all serves to direct attention from the domestic situation.’

‘Evidence?’

‘Oh, evidence,’ Fullalove said dismissively. ‘You seem to be remarkably free from any. He could have had an incurable disease and decided to end it all. Or he could’ve been in debt to some gambling syndicate. Have you checked his medical records? Or his financial records?’

‘How can I do that? I’m in no position to check anything.’

‘So I guess we’ll never know. Unless you decide to work the case *pro bono*. Not that there’s any guarantee we’ll ever know even if you do that.’

Plant looked at him. The old if looks could kill look. He tried hard. But killing required more than looks.

‘Let’s face it, Plant, you don’t have a case. You’re like an empty left-luggage locker. You’ve probably got that metallic taste in your mouth. And a hollow feeling. And time’s running out. You’re growing older by the minute. By the second. Every day. Every night. Every hour. You’d think intelligent design could have designed something different. Like not running out of time.’

Plant considered the possibilities but could not immediately come up with a better model. Not right now. Neither for intelligent design nor gainful employment.

'You need to get yourself on the government payroll. Time was with your slender qualifications and attainments you'd be lucky just getting seedy divorce cases and a bit of office surveillance.'

Plant neither confirmed nor denied.

'But now with things all changed it's got to be different. Everything's contracted out now. All arm's length. Plausible deniability. Has to be, anyway, since they've sacked so many staff. Have to hire them back on contract to get anything done. That's where you need to interpose your body. Any work you're going to be getting is going to come from the terrorist budget. Police or customs or department of defence or security. All outsourced.'

'And?'

'And what?'

'Is there a point to your observations?'

'Could be.'

'You warning me or something?'

'Never,' Fullalove said. 'Just bringing you up to speed as we used to say.'

'Not something I ever said.'

'That's what I figured. You need to learn the lingo.'

'What, double talk?'

'Whatever it takes. Then, once you're in there, you've got access to all the data bases. Then you know all the news.'

Chapter 21

Not being in there, and having no wish to apply for admission, Plant had to seek out other sources of information. The obvious person to talk to was Ted Kelly again. Obvious to Plant, anyway. The rock'n'roll roundsman. From the days when newspapers had rounds, back before the redundancies. At least he might get a smoke, which he wasn't going to get from talking to any of the other people he had talked to.

Kelly was still in his kimono. No sign that he'd had a bath, shaved or combed his hair. He came to the door wreathed in the sweet smell of marijuana. Vintage Leonard Cohen played in the background.

'You just caught me,' he said.

'You about to go out?'

'Where would I go?'

'Good point,' Plant agreed.

'I was thinking of putting up the shutters and pounding the keyboard.'

'Words or music?'

'That's an idea,' Kelly said. 'I was thinking maybe I should write an obituary for Slater. But then I thought, where would I publish it? But maybe I should write a song.'

'Why not?'

He closed the door and they walked through into his lair. Old brown armchairs. They sank into them.

'That's as far as I got,' he said. 'Poor old Slater. Sad, really.'

Plant nodded.

'So what happened? Did he jump or was he pushed?'

'What do you reckon?' Plant asked.

'I've no idea,' he said. He sounded surprised. Expressed surprise. That Plant might think he might know something, anything. 'Can't imagine he was killed by an envious rival 'cause nobody envied him. No one thought of him as a rival. Mostly they never even thought of him at all, he was off the board, off the planet pretty much.'

'Is that so?' Plant said.

'Never struck me as the suicidal type, either. Depressive, yes. Gloomy, why wouldn't he be? Who isn't? But suicidal, no. He knew the way things are.'

Plant sought clarification. 'How are they?'

Kelly went into the kitchen and fiddled around making coffee.

'Depressing. Not the way we thought it was going to be. Though there again, if we'd thought about it enough, we should've known. History shows, and all that. You start off as a radical and you end up disengaged from all political processes and their self-proclaimed representatives. A heritage of disillusion, cynicism and nihilism is all that's left to us. And

whether that will give birth to the glorious revolution or an era of economic collapse and reactionary repression, who knows? Or even cares?'

'So what did you want to see me about?' Kelly asked, coffee made and poured, an already burning joint in hand.

'A bit more background.'

'Go on.'

'Specifically, drugs.'

'You've come to the right place,' Kelly said.

He sucked deeply on the joint and then offered the remains to Plant. Saliva encased.

Plant declined.

'That's right, you've got this thing about body fluids. Here, roll yourself a fresh one.'

'What do you mean, I've got this thing about body fluids?'

'Just observing you. The recoil. Fair enough.'

He pushed a plastic bag of grass across the low table, papers inside. Plant rolled himself a number, lit it, inhaled, spoke.

'Apparently he was planning on writing about some rock group that was part of a drug syndicate.'

'Which one would that be?'

'Were there lots?'

'What d'you reckon?' Kelly asked. 'Have a guess.'

Plant reflected.

Maybe it wasn't the sort of topic to raise over a joint and a coffee. Maybe it was the sort of discussion that got you pushed down a cliff so that you never discussed it again.

'It's like Drugs and the Olympics. Drugs and football. Drugs and swimming. Drugs and horse racing. Drugs and fashion parades. Drugs and hedge fund traders. Where do you begin?'

'I guess it was a naive question,' Plant said. Feeling naive.

'You said it,' Kelly said.

'It was a group called Smackaroo.'

'That old story. Was that the best he could do? Poor old Slater.'

'What do you mean?'

‘Well, it’s hardly breaking news. They went down years ago. Good group, too. That’s what broke them up.’

‘What did?’

‘Getting busted. The whole caboodle. They were part of some big syndicate. The manager went down big time. And that was the end of them. Pity, but there you are. No one wanted to touch them after that. Lost their recording contract. Ridiculous, really. So what was Slater onto?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It was all over the papers. Surprised he thought there was still a story in it.’

‘So it all came out?’

‘Some of it,’ Kelly said ‘Probably it didn’t all come out. Doesn’t usually. I wonder what he thought he was on to. Maybe he’d got something new.’

‘So who would know the full story?’

‘No one’s going to know the full story. Not that they’re going to admit to. But you can get the official version and work out what’s been left out and covered up.’

‘And where would I find that?’

‘In the newspapers.’

‘Was it reported?’

‘Shit, yes. Where were you?’

‘I don’t know. Depends when it was. When was it?’

‘When was it?’ Kelly took a long toke on his joint. ‘No idea. The years all roll into one seamless past which I try to forget.’ He fixed his eyes on the spiralling smoke. ‘Twenty years ago? Thirty? Fifteen? Ten? Hard to say.’

‘That’s helpful.’

‘Best I can do. Why don’t you try one of the band?’

‘Are they still around?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Not in gaol?’

‘Not that I heard. The band never did time. Just got destroyed. Destroyed but still around. The story of our times.’

‘So how do I find them?’

‘No idea. Ask around. Do an internet search. You’re the investigator.’

‘You were a journalist.’

‘Yeah, well. Let’s not get imaginative. Being a journalist means you just write what you’re told. Someone feeds you this government leak or PR release or whatever, and you write it up. No one goes looking for stories any more. You know that.’

‘I guess so.’

‘You better believe it.’

‘Or what?’

‘Or you’re going to be sadly disappointed.’

Plant sat there, sad.

‘Roll another one, mate, and cheer up.’

Plant did that and cheered up.

Chapter 22

Plant drove back up the northern beaches and along Pittwater Road to Church Point. He stood at the ferry wharf and gazed round idly at the boats, the water, the tree-covered ridge of the National Park. He could see why Slater had lived out here. Clean air. Clean water. Away from the traffic and fumes and noise and crowds of the city. He sat there, waiting for the ferry to leave, sipping at a coffee. He wondered about a croissant or a muffin. Maybe a climb up the steps on the island would burn off some sugar and fat and caffeine so he could indulge again another day. Maybe it would lead to another vision of Celia, clad or not, partially or otherwise. The element of surprise.

The ferry gave a single hoot of warning. Departure imminent. Plant headed for it, muffin less, croissant free.

‘Oh, you again,’ Celia said.

‘Can’t deny it.’

‘I’m sorry, that sounded awfully rude. Do come in. How nice to see you.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Or is that overdoing it?’

‘Not at all. It’s nice to be welcomed.’

‘Isn’t it?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ Plant agreed.

There seemed no obvious way forward from that.

She was sitting at the table with a cardboard box full of old books beside her, pulling off the jackets, breaking the bindings, dropping them into a waste-paper basket on the floor, and then ripping the pages apart and tearing them in half. Plant looked out beyond her to the veranda. The gap in the railing had been repaired. Out on the water the same half dozen boats floated at their moorings. He switched his gaze back inside.

‘So what brings you here?’ she asked.

‘I was in the neighbourhood ...’

‘So you thought you’d drop by.’

‘Yes.’

‘Any particular reason?’

‘Just to say hello.’

‘Hello, then,’ she said. ‘How nice. I meant, did you have any particular reason for being in the neighbourhood?’

‘Just following up some inquiries.’

‘Not Slater’s,’ she said. ‘He won’t be needing you.’

‘I guess not.’

‘I think the job ended with his end,’ she said. ‘Well, I know it does.’

‘Of course.’

‘He won’t be writing his novel, so your services as a private-eye model won’t be required.’

‘I guess not, if that’s what he wanted me for.’

‘Whatever it was he wanted you for, I’m not planning on continuing with it.’

She gave him a steady look.

Plant smiled.

‘So,’ she said, ‘you’re not expecting me to re-hire you ...’

Plant smiled some more.

‘You are,’ she said.

‘No, no,’ Plant said.

‘Forget the “no, no.”’

‘O. K.’

‘Why would I hire you? You think there’s something suspicious about his fall? What do you know?’

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said, ‘whether it’s suspicious or not. What do the police think?’

‘They haven’t said.’

He nodded. Wisely, as it were.

‘So what were these inquiries you were following up?’

‘That band you mentioned.’

‘Forget them,’ she said. ‘Slater’s dead. Nothing you find out is going to be any use to him any more. And anyway, you said he hadn’t mentioned them to you. So why are you interested?’

‘You mentioned them. You said what Slater was planning on writing about the band would get him killed.’

She was silent for a while. Plant waited.

‘Well, he’s dead now, so it doesn’t really matter.’

‘Unless that is what got him killed.’

‘You really are trying to drum up business, aren’t you?’ she said. ‘Don’t you think the police will find out if there are any suggestions of foul play?’

Foul play. It sounded quaintly archaic, a phrase from an old book or ancient script.

Plant looked out through the spotted gums and casuarinas to the tranquil surface of Pittwater. Across on the mainland the National Park rose up from the shoreline, the slopes covered in trees, a few houses down beside the water, a few boats moored at their jetties or out attached to buoys. The birds seemed strangely absent. Maybe it was one of those times of day when you don’t see birds.

‘Where are all the birds?’ he asked.

‘How would I know?’

Clearly not your bird-loving type.

‘How long had you known Slater?’

‘Long enough.’

‘For what?’

‘Legally to inherit this place.’

Plant was taken aback, as she had intended, and indeed as he knew she had intended.

‘I’m the prime suspect. Murders are usually domestic in nature.’

‘So you’re saying it was murder.’

‘No. I’m saying murder in general is domestic in nature. If the police decide this wasn’t accidental or suicide, then I am obviously the prime suspect. And not only to the police. You will suspect me. So let’s be clear on that and we can stop pussyfooting around.’

‘You left out natural causes.’

‘You think that was natural?’

‘A heart attack, say, and then falling.’

‘Vaulting over the rail.’

‘I thought the rail gave way.’

‘Yeah, well,’ she said. Whatever that meant.

‘And you also said suicide. Do you think that was likely?’

‘I’ve no idea. I don’t know what the police will decide.’

‘But from your knowledge of Slater, was suicide likely?’

‘He was a writer. Who knows what’s likely?’

‘He wasn’t under any pressure?’

‘Look, Plant,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what you think you’re doing asking all these questions. I don’t know who’s hired you but it certainly wasn’t me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Plant said.

‘Nor am I about to hire you,’ she added.

He felt sorry about that, too.

There wasn’t much to say. It had all come to an end. He asked about funeral arrangements.

‘No funeral,’ she said.

Plant was surprised. But said nothing.

‘He didn’t want one,’ she said.

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really,’ she said. ‘Couldn’t bear the thought of the humiliation of having no one turn up. The writer’s ultimate nightmare. A forgotten man.’

There was one last bit of conversation.

‘What did Slater mean that time,’ Plant asked, ‘about you and your sisterhood going topless?’

She looked at him with a quizzical, level gaze.

‘You want another look? Trying to cop a feel, is that why you’ve been creeping up closer? You’re as bad as he was. Voyeurs to a man. Not that you can call your lot men. Voyeurs to a voyeur.’

Plant neither confirmed nor denied.

‘I used to be a performance artist,’ she said. As if that explained it all. Plant assumed it must.

‘But you’re not now?’

‘Oh, I still perform, once in a while,’ she said. ‘But no, mainly now I boil down old books.’

‘What, abridge them?’

‘No, boil them. Literally. I rip off their protective covering to expose their vulnerable, pallid nakedness to extreme heat.’

She indicated the pile of torn up pages beside her. It sounded a dreadful thing to be doing. Much better to be a topless performance artist. Much less dishonourable.

‘What for?’ he asked.

‘I cook them up and turn them into *papier mâché*.’

‘How?’

‘Boil them. Hot water usually does the trick. You been getting into any hot water lately?’

She looked across at him. Predatorily, he felt.

‘Why do you do that?’ he asked. He was horrified. There was no concealing it. Nor did he attempt to. Destroying books.

‘You’re just like James,’ she said. ‘You don’t like it, do you, you and your precious books? Well, precious or worthless, they’re all the same to me, I boil them down and turn them into art works.’

He still didn’t like it.

‘There now, don’t tell me I’ve shocked you. What a wimp.’

‘What sort of art works?’ he asked.

‘Death masks,’ she said. ‘You want to pose for one?’

Plant caught the ferry back over from the island. At the wharf the afternoon drinkers had already begun to assemble, shared bottles of wine, glasses in hand, cans of beer, vodka and coke and rum and coke, dogs running around chasing seagulls, children calling out and falling over. Plant headed back to Fullalove’s, uncertain what to do next, if anything.

Chapter 23

Plant accessed the messages on the answer phone on his landline up north.

‘Oh. Oh, hello. Is that Mr Plant? My name’s Olivia Paxton and I was a friend of James Slater’s and he told me to call you if ...’

She faltered, a jumble of ifs and ers.

‘If anything happened to him,’ she said in a rush.

She gave her number. Plant called back.

She went through the same routine again.

‘I was a friend of James Slater’s. He asked me to get in touch with you if anything happened to him ...’

She broke off into a series of snuffles or sobs.

Plant could have offered condolences, something certainly having happened. Or he could’ve been bright and eager, all here I am and bushy tailed. But he stayed silent.

‘He asked me to give you something. I could put it in the post, I suppose, but I don’t know. Maybe I could bring it next time I come down to Sydney. I could drop it into you. Or we could meet somewhere.’

‘When are you coming down?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe it’s important and I should post it.’

‘What sort of thing is it?’ Plant asked.

‘Something he’d written,’ she said.

‘Like a book?’

‘No, no. It’s not published. I think it might be the only copy. So I don’t really want to risk the post.’

‘No, definitely not,’ Plant said, with an authority he hardly recognised. Did he know so much about the uncertainty of mail deliveries? Or was it that old sound of a damsel in distress, triggering that immediate, instinctual offer of a shoulder to weep on as he called to the ostler to saddle his steed and put on his shining armour to set out into the dark night on a mission of aid.

‘What should I do?’ she asked.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m up near Mullumbimby. Between Mullum and Billinudgel,’ she said.

Near his own territory. Except he was down in Sydney. That scuppered any plans of just dropping in. Unless of course he drove back up the coast and just dropped in.

He could do that. Go back up. Nothing was keeping him in Sydney. Celia had made it clear that she wasn’t keeping him on the case. He could go back up and check on his seedlings. Fight off the aphids and slugs and snails and leafcutters and wallabies that were always ready to swarm in and devour them. Replenish his stash which was running low. Get back to his rural retreat. Except it wouldn’t be a retreat if he was up there for business.

‘Are you there?’ she said.

‘Yes, just thinking.’

‘What should I do?’

‘Just hang on to it. I’ll come up.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Fullalove said.

Plant tried impassivity.

‘Oh yes?’

‘I need to get some decent weed. I’m not sure about this hydroponic shit everyone grows down here. You never know what they’ve done to it. What they’ve sprayed on it, or put in the water they grow it in.’

‘How will you get back?’ Plant asked.

‘I’ll come back down with you.’

‘I may be up there for a while.’

‘That’s cool,’ Fullalove said, with supremely irritating, calm acceptance. ‘I don’t mind a bit of a break. You’re not busy or anything?’

‘I’m working on this case.’

‘Sure, so you’ll probably have to come back down at some point, won’t you?’

‘Unless things develop up there.’

‘That’s cool,’ Fullalove assured him.

Plant planned on an early start by six. It was gone seven before they got away. Fullalove insisted on rolling joints as they drove. Plant wasn’t smoking. A futile gesture of denial, Fullalove assured him.

‘THC stays in your bloodstream for four days. And it stays in the fatty tissue for months, years, for ever, probably. Like John Keats’ hair. Traces of opium still in it a hundred years after he died.’

But Plant had no wished to get booked so he refused Fullalove’s every offer of a smoke, and kept scrupulously to the speed limits.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Fullalove said, smoking away, blandly unperturbed, as if somehow he had it all fixed or could do if the need arose. Or was that just Plant’s impression, victim of passive smoking, stoned and paranoid despite himself, as they cruised up Pacific Highway, hanging out till they got there and he could roll one of his own, which he did as soon as they arrived, some time after six o’clock.

Chapter 24

Olivia Paxton came to her door dressed in retro-hippy gear. The house was furnished the same way. Wind chimes on the veranda, hanging crystals refracting light, Japanese paper lampshades, cane chairs draped with batiks, even a bean bag, all in chiaroscuro, the veranda around the house keeping the rooms shaded and gloomy, a gloom of times past rather than of anything depressing, feathers and shells adorning the window sills, candles in old candlesticks, rural nostalgia or provision against power failures.

'Have you lived here long?' he asked.

'All my life,' she said.

She took his silence to mean further explanation was necessary.

'It was my parents' house,' she said.

Hippy dynasties. It was like some religious group with sumptuary laws or rigidly preserved traditions, the clothes and furnishings transmitted from generation to generation. He hadn't thought of hippies in terms of inheritance. That was a mistake, he realised. Returning to the land was all about land, owning land, acquiring and transmitting property, remaining true to their origins as Fullalove might have put it. It explained why she looked the way she did, possibly.

'Take a seat,' she said.

He did so as she rummaged around on a small wood and cane table, cluttered with hand-made pottery bowls holding paper-clips and hair-clips and buttons and nail-clippers, glasses with pens and pencils in them, and such like. She picked up a small box made of wood and porcupine quills, slid back the lid, took out rolling papers, glued three together, and filled them with a mixture of heads and leaf, crumbling up the heads, spreading it all out evenly, regularly. Plant relaxed in his chair. He could feel each tense tendon letting go, his breathing slower. He stretched his shoulders, his toes, anxiety flowing away.

But not totally dispersed. She stopped halfway through rolling the joint, laid the components on the table and stood up.

'Before I forget,' she said, leaving the room.

Plant sat like one of those souls beside the River Lethe, yearning for the other bank. Should he reach across and finish it for her? Make an improvised cardboard *faux* filter from the rolling papers packet? Make sure the leaves and heads were fully broken up, packed firmly but not too tightly, room needed for air for combustion, but not too much otherwise it would

incinerate too quickly, lick the adhesive edges, get it all ready to go for when she returned, light it, even? He was still debating between desire and decorum when she returned with a brown manila envelope.

'First things first,' she said.

He was not going to argue about her priorities as long as the second thing came in close, didn't stumble on the way.

She handed over the envelope. No name or address. He took out the contents, A4 sheets paper-clipped together, print-outs from a computer, paginated. No title, no signature, just text.

'This is it?'

'This is what he gave me to give to you.'

'Just this?'

'He said if anything happened to him to give it to you.'

'When was this?'

'About a month ago.'

'A month?'

'I only heard last week,' she said. 'That he was ...'

'I'm not being critical,' Plant said. 'I was trying to place when he would have given it to you. It must have been soon after I talked to him.'

'It could be a bit longer than a month, maybe, I don't remember precisely,' she said.

'What did the covering letter say?'

'There wasn't one. He didn't post it, he gave it to me when I was in Sydney. We didn't write to each other.'

'Why's that?'

'We just didn't. He didn't want me to write and have Celia find the letters. And he didn't write on principle.'

'What principle was that?'

'Don't put anything in writing.'

'But he was a writer.'

'Yes, well,' she smiled. 'Work that one out.'

'Would you say he was paranoid?'

'What's paranoia?' she asked.

Plant assumed she knew the dictionary definition. This was just a rhetorical flourish.

‘I would say he was careful,’ she said.

‘Fair enough.’

‘With that cow around he had to be.’

‘That cow would be ...?’

‘The one with the big teats,’ she said.

At least that was how it sounded to Plant.

‘She liked to flash them around,’ she said. ‘As you would have noticed if you’ve ever met her.’

‘Ah,’ Plant said.

‘I take that as a yes,’ she said.

She finally lit the joint. Plant waited politely till she passed it across.

‘So you were in Sydney,’ he said.

‘Yes. I was in Sydney.’

‘Why?’

‘To see him. Sometimes I drove down. Sometimes he drove up.’

‘You were having a relationship?’

She did the demure bit, lowered head, no reply.

‘Fair enough,’ he said.

‘Why shouldn’t it be?’ she asked.

‘No reason.’

She did the not deigning to reply number.

‘You didn’t fly?’ Plant asked.

‘Couldn’t,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

‘Oh,’ she said, taking the joint off Plant. She inhaled slowly. ‘Too risky.’

‘Deep vein thrombosis?’ he suggested. ‘Fear of flying?’

‘Just common sense,’ she said. ‘You can’t carry dope on a plane.’

‘So you were carrying dope?’

‘I’d take him some down if I was going to Sydney. Or he’d drive up here and pick some up if he’d run out.’

‘So these were dope trips.’

‘You disapprove,’ she said, taking a last toke on the joint and stubbing it out in the abalone shell that served as an ashtray.

‘Not at all,’ Plant said, eyeing the roach sadly. He could’ve sucked another lungful out of that.

‘Sure,’ she said sceptically.

‘Just trying to get a sense of what was going on.’

‘What was going on?’ she said. ‘I wish I knew. He knew that bitch was screwing him. He knew she was after his house.’

‘How was she going to get that?’

‘Divorce him and get half his assets. Or kill him and get the lot.’

‘You think she killed him?’

‘Why not?’

‘What did he think?’

‘Well, he was still alive, wasn’t he, so it hadn’t happened.’

‘Did he think she might kill him?’

‘He thought somebody might try. That’s why he said if anything ever happened to him ...’ She broke off.

Plant sat impassive, assessing the performance.

‘She was capable of it,’ Olivia continued.

‘What do you mean? You know that for a fact?’

‘James thought she might have been an agent.’

‘An agent?’

‘You know, trained. He thought she might have been put onto him to keep him under surveillance. Stop him writing.’

‘Who would want to do that?’

‘How would I know?’ she asked. ‘Some arm of the state.’

‘Arm of the state?’

‘That’s how he put it.’

‘Really? That she was on to him to stop him writing?’

‘You don’t believe me, do you? You think it’s nonsense.’

‘I believe you,’ he said. ‘At least, I believe that Slater might have believed that. Whether it’s likely ...’

‘So you’re on her side.’

‘I’m not on anyone’s side.’

‘Great,’ she said.

She got up and disappeared into the bathroom. Tears, probably. Plant didn’t look. Maybe he was no good with women, he reflected. It wasn’t clear that Slater had been that good with them, either.

‘So,’ he said, when she returned, ‘Slater thought Celia was going to kill him.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ she said. ‘He thought she might have been put onto him. And he knew she was keen to get her claws onto his property.’

‘So why did he stay with her?’

‘They’d been together for years.’

‘And he just stayed with her even though he thought she was an agent?’

‘He’d only started to think that recently.’

‘So why didn’t he get away from her?’

‘Property,’ she said. ‘If they split she’d get half of everything he had. They’d have had to sell the house. Split the proceeds. Then where would he live? He wouldn’t have enough to buy anywhere. He couldn’t face the disruption.’

‘Did he think of moving up here?’

She shook her head. ‘We talked about it.’

‘And?’

‘He was so traumatised living with her I don’t think he could face the prospect of another relationship, too much hassle. He just wanted to write his book.’

‘But didn’t you say you were having a scene with him?’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘But weren’t you?’

‘Living together is something else again.’

‘Yes,’ Plant said. He remembered. Those times he’d been no good with women.

Did she resent Slater for not moving in with her? Did she resent being in third place, behind his commitment to his book and his staying with Celia? The thought flickered past Plant

unbidden. As thoughts do. Or was she minimizing her importance, reducing the significance of her involvement? And why? To avoid any attention from the police, from the press? But as far as the media was concerned Slater was getting no more attention dead than alive. Not a wise career move if that was what he had planned, success by suicide, posthumous reissue of collected works, universal accolades. No, it hadn't happened. And surely Slater would have realised that, he would have known that, that suicide was not going to get his name up in lights or wherever he wanted it, on the spine of a million books maybe. It hadn't happened and it wasn't going to happen.

'But did you want to move in with him? Or have him move in with you?'

'It wasn't up to me,' she said.

'Were you upset that he didn't make the move?'

'Why would I be upset?'

Plant said nothing.

'I liked him and I liked my independence.'

'Just liked?' Plant asked.

'No. More than liked.'

'And Slater?' Plant asked. 'What were his feelings towards you?'

She stood silent for a while. Maybe she was thinking. Maybe she was into the dramatic pause. Maybe he was being too heavy.

'He felt the same way,' she said.

It would have been churlish to ask, what way was that, you still haven't defined it.

'What way was that?' Plant asked.

She gave him one of those looks of grand disdain. It confirmed his suspicion that many of the hippies were descendants of the landed gentry of earlier times and other shores. That patrician confidence. That hauteur. That silent contempt.

Plant could feel it. That silent contempt.

A tough little cookie beneath the floral prints. And once you'd spotted that you could sense the physical toughness, the wiry frame. All those hours of working the land. Tough enough to tip someone over a veranda rail, Plant found himself thinking. Not a thought he would have sought out. Pity about that. He'd found her rather attractive and engaging.

'Did he have any friends?' he asked. 'Anyone who knew him well? Besides you?'

She shook her head.

'I don't know,' she said.

Chapter 25

Back at his rural retreat Plant settled down with Slater's print out.

I was reading an account of how the radical movements in the United States were targeted and destroyed in the 1960s and 1970s. Later, of course, I began to suspect the reliability of such books. With such a repressive apparatus, how were they ever published? I began to suspect they were in fact sponsored by the internal security agencies, disseminating a few truths that were already known, together with a lot of disinformation. This was the logic of their production. The consequent message was the complete mistrust instilled into the radical movements. All these accounts of infiltration and bad faith and monitoring and covert control meant that nobody believed in anybody any more. A climate of suspicion was created. The co-operative impulse was paralysed. Paranoia came into operation as the ultimate control mechanism of the security agencies. Once introduced into the system it spread and replicated like a virus. It was a germ warfare that removed co-operative radical consciousness from effective activity for decades.

But that was yet to come. It was coming, you could see it coming. But this was in the early stages. And in this account of state subversion and control, I read how copies of an underground radical paper were sprayed with a substance that made them repugnant to would-be purchasers and readers. What the substance was was not spelled out. Supposedly it gave off a bad smell.

It seemed all too likely and yet all too simple. It certainly related to things that seemed to be happening. At this time I was writing a political novel. It was a historical novel but its contemporary relevance was not something I was concealing. These were early days, before the days of total mistrust, early days in which ideas were shared, projects discussed, plans revealed.

I was living in the inner city at the time. Balmain. The house was full of transcripts and notes. This was before the days of internet searches. The table was piled high with books around the topic, photocopies of published and unpublished accounts, print-outs of microfilms were

stacked in tottering piles, all emanating a sickly chemical discharge as the photographic paper and inks broke down. Every day I sifted through the materials, every day I seemed to go more slowly, parts of the book were drafted, but other parts remained stubbornly fragmentary, incomplete, inconclusive. And I was developing a weariness, a terrible lethargy, I found myself resisting getting down to the project, the appeal of sitting on the front steps and looking at the traffic on the harbour appealed more and more, the gloom at the back of the room, where the table stood safely away from the bright sun and the glare off the water, became even more repelling. And when I did drag myself in and settle down, a black fog seemed to envelop me, a dull cloud of paralysis, and a slow headache would begin to develop.

The oppression at the desk, the sense of fatigue sitting there, was not something I had experienced before. I was generally glad to write, to be able to engage, to have freed myself from all the intrusions and obstacles that endeavoured to steal my time from writing. I had cleared this space each day in order to write and I was eager to begin. And fatigue, I might have felt that at the end of a morning's or evening's writing, but it was hardly explicable at the beginning. I was enjoying the project, I was engaged with it, I believed in it. There was no reason for this weariness.

Other things were happening at this time to create their suspicions and anxieties. I have written about them in passing in other pieces. Enough just to list them now, a representative handful. The phone calls with no one there when I answered the phone. The clicks on the line when someone was there. The car tires flat in the morning with depressing regularity. The break in with the television stolen but cash left in a drawer. The phone inquiry as to whether I was the writer who had died of a heroin overdose, there were two officers down at the State Library who had a bet on it, they were going to be very disappointed. This was the context.

That agents of internal security forces had sprayed radical newspapers with a bad smell did not seem totally persuasive. But that they had sprayed them with some psychoactive chemical substance, this was a possibility that seemed much more likely. What better way to sedate your dissidents than by chemical means? It was already being done with the mentally ill. The old policy of incarcerating them in asylums had come to an end. Instead they were being fed chemical medicines and turned back into the community. The medicines kept them controlled, they shuffled zombie-like around the streets of the suburbs every day. I had only to go up to buy bread or a newspaper or post a letter to see them shuffling past. Chemical control had replaced

stone walls. It was part of the new economic thinking. Hospitals were too expensive, they required staff, they required maintenance, they occupied valuable real estate. Chemicals provided profits for the drug companies, released the real estate for developers, and by dispensing with hospital staff increased the pool of unemployed which lowered wages all round. It could have been done with prisons, too, except society needed to see justice done, needed to believe its enemies were all locked up. But the political enemies, it could be done with them. They could not be locked up because they were never brought to trial, they could never be brought to trial because if they were the extent of the resistance to the system would be revealed, the critique of the system would be made public and the system's repressive values would be revealed, which would produce more opposition, just as trials would produce martyrs.

And this was the chemical age. The full extent of that was hardly realised, yet the evidence was around. The experiments with psychoactive drugs through the 1950s and 1960s had been reported on. It was known that the military and intelligence communities had experimented with LSD. There were books that had documented this, and I read my way through them. It was obvious that they told only part of the story, and that there were many more research projects, and many more substances involved, than were revealed. But what was revealed was chilling enough. Experiments had been undertaken on unwitting subjects in various Bohemian subcultures. The days of using prisoners as guinea pigs had, apparently, come to an end. So psychoactive substances were distributed and their effect observed on Bohemians and Beats and counter-culturals. Such field testing was widespread. At other times chemicals were released in the air over San Francisco and biological warfare 'simulants' were released in the London Underground, on Waterloo Bridge, on the Thames embankment and in massive quantities off the Dorset coast between 1964 and 1977.

As for the operational use of chemical agents, the war in Vietnam had provided evidence enough of the chemical saturation of that country and those people with defoliants that resulted in appalling birth deformities. And the record of mentally disturbed combatants, chemically saturated and de-socialised, was everywhere to see in the USA. These were the Vietnam veterans, unemployed, unemployable, sleeping rough on the beaches all the way up the Californian coast. But it was the Gulf War that provided the fullest evidence, as after the war the combatants developed mysterious illnesses, attention span deficits, sickness, desperation. There were too many explanations. First of all denial, denial that there was any 'Gulf War syndrome.'

Then the British said that it was the pesticides used to protect troops from mosquitoes, commanders in the field had bought additional local pesticides and overdosed their troops. Then it was the cocktail of preventative medicines that the troops had taken and been injected with. Then it was the toxic fumes of the burning oil wells. Then it was the release of Iraqi chemical warfare agents when chemical plants were incinerated. No one suggested it was British and American chemical and germ warfare substances. Yet what better a situation in which to test them, against an opponent who had been proclaimed to have stockpiled chemical and gas warfare substances, why not test your materials in that situation and blame the opponent for the consequences?

It is comparatively easy to write about the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, despite all the suppressions and disinformation. The record of their occurrence is unambiguous, the visual catalogue of atrocity and destruction, the rhetoric of the war-makers. It is easier and far less problematical to dwell on them than to move back into the world of shadows and uncertainties, into the unknown and unprovable. There is little palpable that I can point to: it is all intuitions, deductions, insights, convictions, beliefs. These are the novelist's tools. They are hardly questioned in the world of high modernism. They are fine for the world of Henry James or Virginia Woolf. But once we move to the world of internal security and the control of thought and the harassment of dissidents, a doubt tends to be mounted. But is it the methods, or the conclusions, that are resisted?

Once the concept was entertained it spread like poison gas on the wind. The materials on the desk were contaminated, but why would the contamination be confined to them? What about the books beside the bed? What about the stack on the shelves against the wall? How could we not have thought of them, it was obvious, surely? Maybe it was just the titles by Jack Lindsay and Christopher Hill and other Marxists. But it wasn't. It was all of them.

This was not something easily accepted. After all, it was only a hypothesis, based on one little item in my reading, reinterpreted. And then confirmed by intuitive measures in which I alternatively believed and disbelieved. And it was inconvenient, massively inconvenient, unacceptable. This was the library I had been building up for a quarter of a century, lovingly assembled from teenage years in second-hand bookshops, from years of purchasing, from review copies, signed copies, from remainder houses, it was a vast, unique collection, my capital horde.

At times it had been almost coterminous with my identity: that pride in possession, that fetishism of ownership, that private library of Alexandria, now suddenly declared doomed.

But the evidence was there, the logic was clear enough. The numbing, dulling effect, the weariness that came from poring over one of those books, or sitting with it in your hands or on your lap. Controlled experiments were easy enough to try. Some innocuous new paperback, bought at random, was a joy to read. But with these books in the house or in the office at university there was a great heaviness, a cloud of exhaustion. And gradually the symptoms came into focus. The puffiness in the hands, the aching in the arms and fingers, the tenderness in the armpits, the slightly swollen feeling of the gums, the aches along the sinus. Nothing very dramatic. Nothing very distinctive. But now I could notice that after being in the office for half an hour, moving a few books or papers around the desk, that puffiness in the gums, that irritation in the throat would begin. Dust, old books, maybe. Maybe not.

And the mail. These were still the days of mail. The mail was a life-line to the world. The exchange of ideas. The connection with journals, publishers, writers. The source of magazines and books. It was the daily habit, picking up the mail, the source of excitement, fulfilment, as well as rejection and despair. And it was all contaminated. Letters from Eastern Europe always arrived opened, no attempt to reseal them. That had been the pattern for a while. I noticed it wryly. You just assumed everything was intercepted. But to think that it was not only intercepted but chemically treated, that was a new horror. Was it possible? Of course it was possible. It was all intercepted, it was routinely monitored, what was more simple than to saturate it with some substance after examination? What easier way to enter the houses of your listed dissidents than through the mail, treating every letter, every paper, every book, every package. There was no need to infiltrate time-release capsules into the house, to poke aerosol sprays in at the open windows, to break in under the guise of robbery. The mail delivered it all.

What can be told so briefly now came from a long process of observation and speculation. The evidence was assembled and considered and accepted and rejected, reviewed, endlessly mulled over and doubted and disputed. It went through many varieties of interpretation. Someone would pass on a book, a loan or a signed copy of some recent production, and I would bring it home to read, and then my partner would pick it up, or I would put it down, and the conclusion would be voiced, it was off. And then we would speculate that this A or B giving us a poisoned chalice, infiltrating a new dose of depressant into the house by

way of a gift, and a rage would develop against A or B. But then there was the further possibility that A or B was targeted too, that his or her books were all similarly sprayed, their mail likewise contaminated, so the rage against them would swing back into a sympathy, they too were true spirits in this underground war of repression, this chemical control of energy and commitment, this germ warfare against the free mind.

Chapter 26

The document continued.

At weekends we would drive out into the country. It was a way of escaping this proliferating poison, this accumulating evidence of the impalpable, the unprovable, whose symptoms were so evident yet so undemonstrable. We would leave this world of shadows and fogs, of illusions and chimaeras, and go down the coast and walk along the edge of the surf, or up into the mountains and gaze at the waterfalls; and in the country or in the car we would talk about it, endlessly going over the same ground, our doubts, our fears, our uncertainties, our perceptions. We felt safer talking about it out of the house. If it were true, then it was a vast and terrifying discovery. This was something not even touched upon in all the revelations of dirty tricks by the security agencies. Well, there was every reason to doubt those books, to assume they were exercises in containment, reiterating what had already been discovered or leaked and closing off any further speculations. And this, if it were true, was a speculation that would result surely in immediate closure for anyone who revealed it. So the house was not a place we liked to talk about such things. The clicks and noises and variations in volume on the phone suggested all too clearly that it was tapped. And a tap on a phone could also be a room microphone, according to the sort of books I read. Maybe that was just to encourage paranoia, maybe it was true. But the car, out in the country, seemed comparatively safe. And we would stop at roadside stalls and buy fresh vegetables and fruit. And talk. And then come back through the sprawling reach of the suburbs. And by the time we were back we would be exhausted and the momentary refreshment beside the surf or the waterfall would have dissipated and we would be home with headaches from the glare of the sun or the traffic fumes clogging the sinuses, hands puffed up from gripping the

steering wheel for so far; or were there other causes, you had only to think about it, you didn't have to tune into the car, lay fingers along the dashboard, the seats, the roof fabric, though we did, to know, and we didn't want to know, but what was easier than breaking into a house or intercepting the mail than to break into a car, left on the street every night, or in a car-park all day, and infiltrate a chemical substance that would emanate its effects week after week after week?

And if it was the papers, the notes, the typescripts, the books that had been sprayed, why was it not everything else? The clothes you wore, your very self? And of course it was. It was an interesting model of perception, beginning with what was held most dear, your own writing, your own books and extending outwards and back again to end up with a recognition of your own toxicity. Was your own body so little loved as to be the last victim to be perceived? Though the symptoms had already been perceived, the fatigue, the headaches, the numbness in the gums, the swellings in the glands.

And over the years other symptoms emerged. My partner developed a swelling on her lower arm, a lump like a growth or a carbuncle. It was inexplicable to the doctors she consulted, but one of them remarked it was like the symptoms of nerve gas poisoning from the First World War, she said. An acupuncturist noticed it when we were up north. 'Been banana farming?' he asked. It was similar to the lumps that the banana farmers he treated developed from the chemical sprays they used, she said he said.

It was like the plague and we attempted desperate remedies. For a start there was the purgation of the unnecessary, the disposal of the piles of old magazines and newspapers, kept for some useful article somewhere. They were summarily thrown out. And then the books. I couldn't bear to destroy them. The elegance of that strategy was not lost on me. Images of burning books provided the great taboo of every progressive consciousness. You would always keep your books, what better an object for calculated contamination? But I removed them from the house, except for those I was immediately using, consulting, drawing on. We tried scrubbing. We tried scrubbing the car, the upholstery – how convenient it was cheap plastic, it could be scrubbed – the fascia panel, the doors, all of it. We tried scrubbing the filing cabinet, the furniture. It made us sick but it had no other obvious effect. Whatever it was, this substance, this force, seemed irremovable, hung there like an ectoplasm that refused exorcism.

It was one of the incentives to move house. And that was a good thing. For years we had been living a temporary existence, renting, expecting to move on, something somewhere better would call. But all the public signs were that the future would only bring something worse. The likelihood of a McCarthyite style purge hovered in the visible distance. It could never happen again, of course. But it hovered there as I planned my next few years: write this book, then write that book, then collect those essays, and as I calculated timetables and strategies, possible publishers, where I would do what, this threat hung there, the political purge that could see us out of a job, blacklisted by publishers and editors. The message was clearly to secure a house now, to establish economic security, to plan for the coming horror. And if I needed confirmation that a horror was coming I needed only look at the signs of horror now. So Bohemia came to an end, we bought property, we cut off connexions with most of the past, told nobody where we were going and took nothing with us. What was there to take anyway, a few sticks of second-hand furniture? We left it all behind, toxic, lethal, contaminated. Likewise with most of our clothes. We began again with a minimum of possessions. Of course some things slipped through, something always does. Over the months these items proclaimed themselves, emanating their discharge. Free from the saturated environment, individual objects gave themselves away.

It would be nice to say it ended there, but of course it didn't. I tried a withdrawal from public life: no more receptions at the Ministry of Culture, no more book-reviewing, no more appearances at symposia and readings. It was not too hard to achieve: the invitations had markedly dropped off, the absences indicated a blacklist already in place. I decided it would be strategic to appear hard to get rather than desperate for recognition. It was not a strategy that worked. It didn't mean media and publishers flocked to unearth me from my reclusive privacy. No one came at all. I also calculated that by this withdrawal I could signal that I was no threat, that I was no longer saying or publishing the unacceptable. But it made no difference. Once you are on a list you are on a list. And anyway, I hadn't stopped writing, even if publishing was getting harder. And if anything the experience of this revived political reaction only hardened my convictions and made me more intransigent. So that didn't help. But I don't think anything would have helped.

And in due course the house was broken into, which of course could have been petty thieves. And in due course we registered the contamination again. The process of registering what was occurring was a long one and a slow one. It was not something I wanted to register, its

implications were too vast. If it were true then what hope of avoidance or evasion was there? But for a while, with the new house, the new furniture, the care not to bring in known contaminated materials, there seemed to be possibilities of hope. I think it was during this period that we began to recognise that this was no individual case. There were other people whose libraries, whose houses, whose vehicles were similarly affected. Visiting, you would begin to feel the same malaise, you would leave enervated, suffering the same dull ache, that irritation in the throat which you would endlessly cough at, that dull swollen feeling in the gums. They would generally be figures from the left, writers, academics, though not always. But they were always in some way oppositional, difficult: people who had refused the encroaching mediocrity of the times, who had refused to subscribe to the promotion of the debased and banal, people who had spoken out. So that it was not much fun visiting them. You started to sink, you slumped there, you refused food, drinks, because you sensed the contamination. There was nothing you could say. It was not something you could even be sure of. But you could be sure of disbelief if you spoke of it. And worse than disbelief was the fear that someone would talk and your theories would become known and then, with a project so vast, so devastating, so secret, you would be eliminated. It was the ultimate unsayable, unknowable.

Being out of the country provided a relief. But again, visiting the sort of people I visited, it was soon re-encountered. In a selfish sort of way that was reassuring. It saved me from thinking, in another country this wouldn't happen. There was no other country. The system was global, the repression recognised no national frontiers, this was a total process.

And travelling you were not necessarily safe. Not if you stopped moving. We rented a house while we were overseas. Hired a car. We were identified with a location. And once again the symptoms returned. Coming back from visiting a friend, a long drive through the sad black hills of Wales, that same desperation occurred, that familiar exhaustion from our old country drives. The sinuses throbbed, the throat caught, the fingers puffed up. And tuning into the car it seemed that once again we had been sprayed. Or irradiated. Or whatever it was that was done.

It was all very abstract, very conceptual, almost metaphorical. We were all too well aware it sounded mad. In fictional explorations of this sort of area in the past, surveillance, monitoring, harassment, I had always built in the delusional hypothesis, conceded the possibility of paranoia. The conventions of literary discourse required that. Studies in craziness are acceptable, accounts of how internal order is maintained are not. But allowing the ambiguities of

over-interpretation concedes too much. Of course we knew our theories seemed excessive; but these are excessive times.

One way of coping with contaminated research materials, we decided, was to photocopy them, throw away the originals and work from the copies. But just to handle the materials affected you badly. We speculated that the substance was absorbed through the skin. It was, after all, a well known way of absorbing poison, a classic renaissance way indeed. Wear this poisoned shirt, kiss this poisoned book. So we bought some rubber gloves from a chemist in order to avoid contact. And after an hour or so of taking out the papers and laying them on the photocopier, the fingers of the gloves had turned brown.

The photocopying achieved nothing. We spent hours copying material to be able to work from uncontaminated pages. But this was the extraordinary thing: the copies emanated the same effects. Perhaps all the photocopying paper had been sprayed. We tried buying it afresh at stationers, checked that it was all right. But once the materials were copied onto that paper, the effects returned. Perhaps the contamination spread through the machine. It made no sense. But the effects were unmistakable.

I would take out a draft manuscript to work from, copy it, but within a few hours, over the days I was working on it, unaware, the old exhaustion, disorientation, desperation would return, the old puffiness, headaches, ear and throat aches.

We hypothesised other possibilities. If these negative effects could still operate through five or six generations of photocopying, then our original chemical model was wrong: or, not necessarily wrong, but only partial.

The other possibility could only be magic. Some transmission of effect through the visual form of the page, through the characters.

If chemical warfare by internal security forces was something not much dealt with in the books of revelation of the secret histories of the secret services, the employment of magic received even less mention. There was, after all, some evidence of experimentation with LSD and other mind altering drugs. But there was almost nothing on the use of psychic forces. Almost nothing. Yet there were those suggestions of Aleister Crowley's closeness to the British secret service. And it had been revealed that the United States military had assembled some psychic research teams. The official story was that this was for remote spying, for psychic penetration of hidden installations. No one suggested the psychics were gathered together for practical

witchcraft. Was it possible? Of course it was possible. If spiritual groups could meet for healing, and they did, then they could also meet to promote sickness. And the chemicals we postulated, were they psychotropic chemicals, chemicals that opened up the consciousness to psychic forces, psychic manipulation? We did not know. All we knew was that photocopying contaminated materials had no protective effect, that whatever substance or method was used was not neutralised by having a copy made.

In the end I got rid of my library. It was not such a wrench. It had become too large. I could no longer find things. Its accumulation of the past was becoming oppressive. Or was that my phobic reaction to the negative effects from handling the books? Whatever, in the end I got rid of it all. It was a great release from the dead weight of the already written. Other things were disposed of too. The dialectic of oppression produced its liberation. A recoil from contaminated materiality produced a freedom from possessions. Necessarily we learned detachment. Once again we moved house. More than once we traded in the car. We bring nothing into this world and assuredly we shall take nothing out of it. And assuredly, after this experience, we were vastly relieved at that.

From *The Weekly Telegraph* (UK) November 2000: 'Chemicals in Stasi papers poison staff.

'German officials looking after files of the former East German secret police, the Stasi, have become ill after touching bundles of paper apparently contaminated with toxic chemicals used in Cold War espionage. One theory is that the chemicals were used to make invisible ink. Another is that the files were deliberately contaminated. Several staff dealing with operational and technical files had respiratory, eye and skin problems.'

Chapter 27

'What do you make of it?' Plant asked, after Fullalove had had a chance to read it..

Fullalove scratched at his unshaven bristles and ran his tongue around his gums.

'Looks to me like he had a pretty shrewd idea of who he thought his enemies were. Can't see why he needed you to identify them. No wonder he went and hid out on an island. Protected by a natural moat. Except that he wasn't protected. Paranoia alone isn't going to save

you. You think you've repelled all invaders and then you go and fall off the deck. Or get pushed.'

'Do you believe it?'

'Why not? Don't you?'

'It seems pretty extreme.'

'I can believe anything,' Fullalove said. 'Makes sense to me.'

'You reckon Celia was right, he just wanted to use me as a model for a P. I.?'

'That seems pretty unlikely, too. No offence intended.'

'None taken.'

'So what is this that he's given you? Part of a novel?'

'I don't know.'

'Is it from the book he was supposed to be writing? Or is it some sort of last testament kind of thing? A voice from the grave. What was he planning on doing with it?'

'I don't know if he was planning anything,' Plant said. 'He just left it for me.'

'When did he write it? That newspaper cutting about the Stasi is ages old.'

'No idea. Could have been way back.'

'You reckon he's been madly researching the archives, or he wrote it years ago? He could have just been sitting on it. How would you know? It's not likely anyone would ever have published it.'

'No,' Plant agreed. 'So say he wrote it way back and sat on it. Filed it away, who knows why? Was he going to develop it as a novel? Publish it as an exposé? Use it in a compensation case against the secret services of the world? Or had he just forgotten it?'

'I'd reckon he wrote it some time back.'

'But still believed it,' Plant said. 'And left it as an "In The Event Of My Death" item.'

'Left it to you,' Fullalove stressed. 'So he asks you to find out who his enemies are. But he already knew. Or thought he did. Now he's dead he tells you. Bequeaths you his testament so you can take up his cause.'

'What, so I can publish it for him, maybe?'

Fullalove did the jaw-dropping, aghast number.

'Are you crazy? You shouldn't even consider the possibility for a nanosecond, let alone think where you could place it.'

‘You reckon?’

‘You want to end up dead like him?’

‘You think it’s that serious?’

‘You want to find out?’

‘Do you believe it?’

‘I can believe anything,’ Fullalove said again. ‘And if it really happened to him, you can be sure it happened to a lot more people like him. This is not something you’d want to talk about if you want to stay safe. This would have been a large scale operation, like spraying the swamps with DDT to get rid of the mosquitoes. Not just something targeted at one or two individuals.’

‘So he wasn’t dysfunctionally paranoid. This was actually happening.’

‘Who knows? Could have been both.’

‘But do you think it’s likely about the chemical stuff?’

‘Like is it true? Who knows? In the end it doesn’t really matter. Slater believed it, so that’s the significant thing. Whether he was being poisoned by chemical means, or he just thought he was, the effect was the same, it drove him mad. Made him dysfunctionally paranoid, anyway. That’s the point. Whether or not any chemicals were involved. The idea of it drove him mad, whether it was true or not.

‘What you’ve got to realize about people like Slater is that they’ve been driven paranoid. It could be that no one’s monitoring their phone calls or reading their correspondence or their emails. Could be. Maybe. But they’ve been made to think they are. And that’s driven them nuts. Perfect. Now there’s no need to monitor them, their paranoia has effectively disabled them.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Why not?’

‘So what Slater had in mind was getting me to broadcast his message. Which may have been delusional, or maybe not.’

‘Exac’ly.’

‘So if I don’t, I let him down.’

‘Who’s going to tell him?’

‘So what am I supposed to do with it?’

‘If I were you I wouldn’t do anything.’

‘I think it’s for real. What do you reckon?’

‘I can believe anything,’ Fullalove said yet again. ‘Could be true, could be delusional. How would you know? But whether it’s true or not, I’d be very careful who I told about it. You don’t want to end up on the list of the next batch to be chemically saturated.’

‘But do you believe it?’

‘Why not?’

‘Seems extreme.’

‘Extreme situations,’ Fullalove said. ‘Could have been worse.’

‘Hard to imagine.’

‘Imagine a drone strike.’

‘I haven’t heard of any drone strikes here.’

‘Well, you wouldn’t, would you?’ Fullalove said. ‘It would just be an unexplained house fire. Or a gas cylinder exploding. Or a bush fire if they really got carried away.’

Plant picked up the document and looked through it again.

‘I wouldn’t do that, either,’ Fullalove said.

‘Do what?’

‘Touch it. Not if it’s as toxic as he reckoned. It would have to be contaminated, wouldn’t it, if it came from him and he’s telling the truth.’

Plant recoiled, dropping the pages to the ground.

‘One touch and you’re paranoid for life,’ Fullalove said.

Plant swore. He headed into the bathroom, soaped his hands energetically.

‘It’s probably absorbed through the lungs,’ Fullalove called out. ‘You breathe it in. Though it’s still probably best not to touch it.’

‘What should I do?’

‘Burn it, maybe. Put it in the garbage.’

‘Garbage?’

‘Unless someone goes through it. Do they? How secure is your garbage?’

‘For heaven’s sake,’ Plant said.

‘Well you could put it in the recycling bin. But think of the implications. Think how many people have been targeted according to Slater. Every dissident and his dog. Think how much contaminated material that’s created. Letters. Papers. Magazines. And then all that gets recycled, so the contaminant is spread even further. It’s like the River Thames water, passed

through the human body twenty something times by the time it reaches London, full of pissed out oral contraceptives, lowering the birth rate.'

'Is that true?'

'So they say.'

'So what should I do?'

'Drink mineral water if you go to London.'

'About this document.'

'Depends whether you need to keep it. You could put it in a lead-lined box and bury it, maybe.'

They sat looking at it there, lying on the floor, exuding menace.

Plant fetched a plastic bag from the kitchen. He stuffed the document into it, with as little contact with the pages as he could manage. He felt his gums going numb, his eyes itching. He held his breath and took the bag outside, deposited it beneath a bush away from the house, put a couple of stones on top of it to try to stop it from blowing away. It could stay there till he figured out what to do with it. Then he came back in and washed his hands again and cleaned his teeth.

'If you don't want it,' Fullalove said, 'I'll take it.'

'You think it might give you a new sensory experience? Boost up your paranoia?'

'No, mate, I'll just take it off your hands for you. Put it in my collection.'

'Of the weird and the wonderful?'

'Of the way we live now.'

'You're not worried about contamination?'

'I'll wrap it in aluminium foil.'

'What'll that do?'

'Who knows? It bounces back radar waves. Might offer some sort of protective insulation. Give it a go, anyway. It would be a shame to throw it out. Interesting document.'

'Do you think he was onto something?' Plant asked.

'Impossible to tell.'

'He certainly had a thing about secret agencies,'

‘Many do,’ Fullalove said. ‘He probably got into it when he thought he was under surveillance. He started looking into it and reading around on the topic and asking people stuff, which probably wasn’t a good idea, in terms of setting off alarms and alerts and, for a person of a literary imagination, which can often be quite vivid, a risky business. It can send you mad, to put it briefly.’

‘Send you mad?’

‘Sure,’ Fullalove said. ‘Whether there’s any truth in it or not, just worrying about whether there was, or wasn’t, would send you dysfunctionally paranoid.’

‘Bonkers.’

‘Bonkers.’

‘He’d obviously thought about it. What was happening. So he presumably talked about it at some point. You reckon that would have got him killed?’

‘Doubt it,’ Fullalove said.

‘But if it’s true ...’

‘It probably is true. But that doesn’t mean it’s what got him killed. Best not to leap to conclusions on that.’

‘But if it was a full-scale operation to narcotize radicals and he started talking about it ...’

‘So what? Who’s going to bother? Whoever might be bothered is just going to say he’s mad. Stark raving paranoid bonkers. Too much weed. Bad quality.’

‘They already said that about him.’

‘There you are, then. So who’s going to take any notice of anything he says or writes? Who’s even going to read any of it? Assuming it ever got published. Which it almost certainly wouldn’t have,’

‘So you don’t reckon the security services bumped him off. To stop him talking about it?’

‘Naaah,’ Fullalove said.

Plant wasn’t sure he believed him. Such a vehement denial. And for Fullalove, who hated giving a simple answer to anything, ‘naaah’ was vehement. Vehement enough to make you think maybe there was something in it.

‘But if he was planning to write a book about how he’d been targeted and put under surveillance and poisoned by the security police, maybe they would try and stop him. To stop the story getting out. Wouldn’t you think? They being the aforementioned security services.’

‘Naaah,’ Fullalove said again. ‘They wouldn’t bump him off. They’d just make sure the book never came out. Or got trashed by the reviewers. They needed him.’

‘Needed him? What for?’

‘To show how unprofitable it is to be an outspoken, independent, leftist writer. He was a great role model. How not to get published. How to get derided in the press. The Media Studies prime example of what profile not to have. How not to have a future. So they wouldn’t have wanted him dead. They’d have wanted to keep him alive. Just. *Pour encourager les autres.*’

‘How could I check it out?’

‘Who could you phone at ASIO and ask to look through their assassinations log to tell you who they’ve bumped off lately? The Director-General, I imagine. Not sure he’d take your call, but you could try.’

‘What about Sled? Isn’t he supposed to be the government man on all the arts boards?’

‘Well, if he is, he isn’t going to tell you anything, is he?’

‘So you do think there might be something in it.’

‘Why would I think that?’

‘Because you’re saying they’d deny it.’

‘They deny everything. On principle.’

‘Well, it’s either them or the drug connection he was writing about.’

‘Naaah,’ Fullalove said again. ‘*Cherchez la femme*, I always say.'

‘What, Celia? What would she know about chemicals?’

‘How do you know there were any chemicals?’

‘Slater thought that he was being poisoned by them.’

‘Brilliant. It doesn’t mean there were any. Whether there were or whether there weren’t, it drove him mad, believing it. Brilliant.’

‘What do you mean, brilliant?’

‘You drive someone mad by making them think their mail’s poisoned. So they give up on using the mail and communicate by email. Which is so much easier to monitor. That way you

really know what they're up to. Whether it's true or not about the poisoning, it doesn't matter. Because it's certainly true that email can easily be monitored. And is.'

'So he was right. He was being targeted.'

'Could be. Someone's certainly poisoned his mind even if his mail wasn't being poisoned. And may indeed have been fulfilling the designs of some intelligence agency.'

'What, poisoning him?'

'Just poisoning his mind. Making him think he's been targeted. Encouraging his delusions.'

'Why?'

'Control. Isolating him from his old friends. Making you think your books are poisoned cuts you off from your research materials. Making you think the mail's poisoned cuts you off from contact with people. Brilliant strategy whether personal or political. Isolates him. Makes him ineffective.'

'So you're saying it is an intelligence agency.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. But more likely than not it's his missus. Just a malignant narcissist cutting him off from the world, excluding all his old mates, and driving the poor bugger nuts. Encouraging his fantasies. Making him dependent on her. Usual narcissist stuff. Not at all uncommon.'

'But she sounds as paranoid as he is. More. She's convinced he'll get himself killed.'

'Interesting,' Fullalove said. 'Usually the partner thinks the paranoia is excessive. They try to hose it down. At least in my experience.'

'Your experience?'

'Such as it was. Clean-cut young ladies telling me I was crazy.'

'And you weren't?'

Fullalove gave one of his crocodile grins.'

'She could be encouraging him,' he went on. 'She goes along with it, stokes him up, makes him so paranoid he suspects everybody. So he calls you in to track down his enemies. Little realizing that they're right beside him in the shape of his shapely missus.'

'Could be.'

'I gather from your discreet silence that she is shapely.'

Plant nodded.

‘There you are, then.’

‘But why?’

‘Keep him close. Stop him straying.’

‘The merely personal,’ Plant said. ‘I guess it happens.’

‘You bet it does,’ Fullalove said. ‘Happens all the time.’

Plant brooded on it.

‘So you reckon it wasn’t true. It was just a delusion she encouraged.’

‘Could be. Why not? The shapely Celia encourages his paranoia. Feeds his fears. Assures him there are forces acting against him. What she eventually does is make him so paranoid that he suspects everybody, he cuts himself off from people he needs because he doesn’t trust anyone, loses the contacts that would get him published and give him work, and he ends up totally isolated, which makes him even more paranoid.’

‘So who’s she working for?’ Plant asked.

‘No reason to think she’s working for anyone.’

‘But she could be.’

‘Could be, sure,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘But not necessarily. Could be just usual feminine strategy to keep your man to yourself. Like I said, c*herchez la femme.* And you’ve got two of the fuckers in the picture.’

‘So?’

‘So *cherchez les femmes,* I guess. You might enjoy it. Too few women in your life, Plant. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Certainly don’t look two of them in the mouth. Giddy-up, I say. Get mounted, mate. The ride of your life.’

Plant tried one of his more supercilious, prudish, above-it-all expressions.

‘You can purse your lips till the cows come home,’ Fullalove said. ‘And that might be a long time since they deregulated the dairy industry and all the dairy farmers up here went bust. But it doesn’t alter the fact that your little hippy friend was down in Sydney making a delivery just before Slater died. How soon before he died? Was she still there when it happened, to use the passive tense? And did she drive back up here that day? Or the day after?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Plant said.

‘Well, you wouldn’t, would you? And you’re not going to get access to the traffic surveillance cameras either.’

Plant shrugged.

‘She could have visited him on the island, got into an argument, like why wouldn’t he leave his missus, and then given him a shove and, oops, into the rail he topples and it gives way and over he goes and she gets the next ferry back and then drives hell for leather back up north.’

Plant remained impassive.

‘Unless of course she and Celia were in cahoots, both of them sick of the old bugger, past his use-by date, so the two of them give him a shove and call it a day. Not inconceivable.’

To Fullalove, nothing much was inconceivable. Especially about womankind. Plant could have happily done without Fullalove’s speculations. But he couldn’t reject them now they had been expressed.

‘You just don’t trust women, do you.’

‘No, I guess I don’t,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘Nor men, either, for that matter.’

Chapter 28

Plant left Fullalove surfing the channels of satellite television.

‘Anything you need from the shops?’ he asked by way of subterfuge.

Fullalove suggested halva, chocolate biscuits, hazelnut spread, and Dutch almond fingers. Plant picked them up at the supermarket in Mullumbimby and then called in on Olivia.

‘You read it?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Did you?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t marked confidential. Maybe I shouldn’t have. But ...’

‘But you did.’

‘Yes.’

‘What did you make of it?’

‘I knew most of it,’ she said. ‘From things he’d told me.’

‘Do you believe it?’

‘Why? Shouldn’t I?’ she said.

‘I don’t know. It seems pretty extreme.’

‘You think he was imagining it?’

‘I don’t know. Do you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘It seemed pretty real the way he wrote about it.’

‘Did it make him depressed?’

‘He didn’t kill himself, if that’s what you mean,’ she said. ‘He would never have done that.’

‘You think?’

‘I’m sure. It depressed him, of course it did. But he’d learned to live with it. He was going to write about it all in his next book.’

‘Was that wise?’

‘You think it might have got him killed?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. I suppose it might have. Depends on how true it was and how many people knew he was writing it. Did Celia know?’

‘El CIA? Of course. She encouraged him.’

‘El CIA?’

‘Le CIA if you prefer. It’s an anagram. Of Celia.’

‘I see,’ Plant said.

‘Do you?’

‘I think so. And you’re saying she encouraged him to write it?’

‘No, not at all. She undermined his writing all the time. She hated it.’

‘So what did she encourage?’

‘His paranoia. She went on about vibes and negative energies and stuff. She was one of those self-proclaimed sensitive souls. She could pick up the vibes just by looking at something. And she kept picking up bad vibes on everything – the books he read, the paper he wrote on.’

‘Really?’

‘So she claimed.’

She rolled her eyes, shook her head slowly, in sad scepticism.

‘So all the stuff about poisoned books and contaminated mail ...’

‘She was right into it.’

‘Into it?’

‘She’d say something was giving off a bad vibe and he’d believe her. And then he’d fit that in with this chemical poisoning idea.’

‘And she went along with that?’

‘Yes. Of course. She encouraged him. She didn’t try and calm him down or anything. She made things worse. She made him suspect everyone. She paralysed him. She made him totally paranoid about everybody. He even suspected me at one stage.’

‘Suspected you for what?’

‘That I was a security agent put onto him. Can you believe it?’

Could he believe it?

‘So she might have driven him to suicide?’

‘She tried hard enough. She was trying to drive him mad, I swear. But he would never have killed himself. He was too angry about it all. He was determined to expose it.’

‘And how did you feel about his paranoia? Did you encourage him?’

‘Me? I tried to take his mind off it. Accept that that is the way the world is and to disregard it. Focus on the positive. Appreciate the beauties of nature. I got him to read the *Bhagavad-Gita*.’

‘But did you believe it? That the CIA or someone was poisoning him?’

‘If anyone was poisoning him, it was Celia poisoning his mind.’

The dove cooed away in the trees. Honey-eaters and fire-tails and wrens hovered and fluttered around the bottlebrush and grevilleas.

‘You know what I think?’ she said. ‘I think Celia could have made it all up. I think she played on his anxieties and drove him mad. I think she made it all up and he believed her.’

She got up and walked around, turning away from Plant.

‘Now you think I’m mad,’ she said.

‘No. Not at all. You could be right. Fullalove would probably agree with you. Who knows?’

‘Who knows?’ she snapped. ‘I’m not the investigator, that’s your job.’

‘Not really,’ he said.

‘What do you mean, not really?’

‘Well, not at all. Slater hired me to look into some stuff. But now he’s dead that’s the end of it.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, no one’s paying me, for a start.’

'I'll pay you,' she said.

'No, no, I wasn't angling for a job.'

'You don't have to,' she said. 'I'm the one who's angling. I want to hire you to find out what happened.'

'Are you sure ...?'

'Am I sure that I can afford you?' she asked. 'Yes, don't worry, you'll get paid.'

Which was interesting in itself, since she exhibited no signs of gainful employment. Such details necessarily being of interest to Plant.

He decided to believe her. 'I wasn't worried about that,' he said.

'You were.'

'Maybe I was,' he conceded.

'I've got some money,' she said. It didn't sound a lot, the way she said it. 'How about I hire you for a week and we'll see how we go.'

'Five days,' he said. 'They can be spread over a couple of months.'

'Call it a week and you can rest on the seventh day,' she said.

'So?' Fullalove asked, pressing mute on the television remote as Plant came through the door. 'You been bonking the extra virgin?'

'What do you mean?'

'Olivia of the heavenly oil.'

'I called in ...'

'I bet you did,' Fullalove said.

'She's hired me to look into Slater's death.'

'So did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Give her one.'

'No.'

'The tantalizing delights of deferment?'

'She's a client.'

'That's never stopped you.'

'Meaning?'

‘Give it time. Nice girls don’t do it on a first date.’

‘It’s nothing like that.’

‘It certainly is. She’s buying you off. With the promise of sexual favours. And she knows there’s not much you can do to investigate anyway. The police won’t give you the forensics. All you can do is ask a few people where they were on the night of whenever it was. Start with her. See if she was down in Sydney. And she’ll schmooze her way out of that one, won’t she? She’s bought you, Plant. And you’re loving every minute of it. So why not? If she pays you and bonks you, you’re well ahead. Might be construed as immoral earnings. But who could prove it?’

‘She’s not likely to have hired me if she killed him.’

‘Of course she is,’ Fullalove said. ‘Oldest trick in the book. Or one of them. She’s got you reporting back to her on anything you discover. So she’s always one step ahead. You start pointing at her, she knows.’

‘And what’s she going to do?’

‘Shower you with sexual favours. Misplace evidence. Arrange an alibi. Stop paying you. Pitch you over a veranda rail. The choices are infinite.’

‘That would look odd, a second person over a veranda.’

‘Old houses. Decaying structures. No surprises. It would make Slater’s death even more credible as an accident. Watch your back, Plant. Don’t let her rest her hand on it and push.’

‘Why would Olivia have killed him? I think it’s far more likely it’s something to do with the drug business Celia said Slater was planning on writing about. The rock group.’

‘Ah, Celia, so you believe her, too,’ Fullalove said. ‘Ah well, that’s reassuring. Nice to know she’s a reliable source of information, even if she wouldn’t hire you to investigate her old man’s death. But she’s pointing you towards her preferred killers. You’ll only be pitting your wits against international drug traffickers. I wonder who’ll win. I’d still look out for any undue pressure on your back. Keep away from the edge of the deck. If you’re walking in town, keep on the inside of the pavement.’

‘So Olivia’s a suspect because she hired me and Celia’s a suspect because she didn’t, is that it?’

‘Pretty much, I’d reckon,’ Fullalove agreed.

‘Olivia thinks that Celia made up all the chemical stuff to drive him mad.’

‘Not impossible. Why don’t you phone her up and ask her?’

‘She’s not likely to tell me, is she?’

‘Probably not,’ Fullalove agreed again.

‘But do you think it’s likely?’

‘Sure. Absolutely. Like I always say...’

‘*Cherchez la femme*,’ Plant said for him. Wearily.

‘Exac’ly,’ Fullalove agreed.

‘So there weren’t any chemicals and it wasn’t the secret service who were his enemies and who drove him mad, it was Celia.’

Fullalove grinned. ‘Well that’s certainly what the secret service would prefer you to think,’ he said.

Chapter 29

Plant gave Uncle Toby a call. Professor Oates. They’d met a few times. In the course of Plant’s inquiries. And Uncle Toby had recommended Plant to a client one time. Maybe the only time. The resulting investigation had not been one of Plant’s resounding successes. But then, as Fullalove pointed out, how many were? Fullalove then went remorselessly on to quote Dylan on there being no success like failure and failure not being any sort of success, nodding wisely as if the words of the poet songwriter embodied eternal truths. As if there were eternal truths. Maybe there were. Who knew? Maybe it was the sort of thing Uncle Toby might have an opinion on.

‘Dear boy, you just *happened* to be near the Gold Coast and your thoughts immediately turned to me. I hope it was immediately.’

‘Of course,’ Plant agreed.

‘How delightful. And you’ve time for a little social discourse?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Spontaneous and informal.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Strictly off the record.’

‘Naturally,’ Plant agreed.

‘Let’s do it,’ said Uncle Toby, as if he were hosting some television game show.

Uncle Toby had time for a coffee. Couldn’t do lunch, dear boy. Pressing commitment.

‘Short and sweet,’ Fullalove said. ‘He wants to find out what you’re up to. But not sit around long enough for you to find out what he knows. Coffee, he can just slurp it down and run if you get too nosy. More difficult to leap up in the middle of lunch. Asking for a doggy bag to take your half-eaten barramundi in.’

‘You reckon he knows something?’

‘Why else would he agree to see you? Personal attraction apart. Which we can probably discount, anyway.’

‘And not doing lunch means he’s up to something?’

‘Could be on a diet. But yes, probably.’

‘How would he know what I want?’

‘Well, if they’ve been monitoring Slater they’d know you’d been hired by him so they might guess you’d come running. If, that is. But it could just be he’s busy.’

‘You want to come along and check him out?’

‘I’ll pass,’ Fullalove said.

Which was possibly interesting in itself, Plant inevitably reflected.

Plant liked the Gold Coast. It was unfashionable to like it. And he wasn’t that keen on late nights at the night clubs. Nor was he to be found sunning himself on the beaches or body-surfing out at sea. But there was a life and energy and freshness, the light and the reflections off the creeks and the canals and the glass surfaces of the high-rises. He liked the sun, the warmth, the restaurants.

Uncle Toby’s manner was not exactly fruity. But there was the suggestion that he could do fruity. In the privacy of his own home. He combined the suggestion of fruitiness with Australian laconic, which gave him the suitably tight-lipped, enigmatic, possible campiness of your classic secret service chap, old style.

Maybe it was all a con on Uncle Toby’s part, an astute piece of academic gamesmanship, how to be knowing without every having to reveal what he happened to know, if anything at all, because he could imply that whatever he happened to know was classified. So people could think he knew things, possibly about them, and so treat him well, the way politicians treat press barons who have files on them. One way or another Uncle Toby had got

himself in the swim, invitations to international conferences and travel grants and visiting lectures and research funding. The latter provided employment for teams of eager, lithe young research assistants, hand-picked, vine-ripened, who would go on to interesting positions in later life, adding to Uncle Toby's legendary vast network of information sources.

'James Slater,' Uncle Toby reflected. 'Unimpressive sort of fellow. Wrote the odd book. Miserable sort of stuff. You know, how ugly America is, let's all eat brown rice and worship the memory of Chairman Mao. Callow sort of politics. Not that I knew him personally.'

'You never met him?'

'I probably met him once or twice. Writers' festivals, that sort of thing.'

'He seemed to think he never got invited to them.'

'Really? Well, he was hardly your best-selling, high profile sort of author. Marginal figure.'

'That was how he put it. He'd been marginalised.'

'He did a pretty good job of marginalising himself. Extreme views. Slender to non-existent talent. I don't know why everybody started imagining they were writers.'

'Would his extreme views have got him killed?'

'So you're saying he was killed. I thought he just slipped and fell.'

'I don't know. I haven't seen the police report.'

'But you'd prefer him to have been killed? I can't imagine by whom.'

'The state?'

'What an extraordinary idea. He might not have been a candidate for honours. He might have felt rejected. Most writers do. And so they should. Doesn't mean anyone thinks they're worth wasting a bullet on. I mean, imagine the paperwork involved. The approval required. It would have to be someone really important to go to all that trouble over. Even supposing for a moment that such things could be done.'

'So not a candidate for a drone strike.'

'You amaze me, Plant. You should have been a writer, not poor old Slater. Are you sure you don't write? Science fiction? Dystopian horror? You clearly have the imagination.'

Plant smiled. He felt that dangerous warm glow of inner satisfaction that even the crudest, most ambiguous flattery can bring.

‘What provokes these questions, dear boy? Did poor Slater leave behind one of those documents with his solicitor? “To be opened in the event of my untimely death.” If it was untimely. Listing a lifetime’s persecution by the dark forces. He was quite mad, you know. Like many a writer. Unbalanced. They get so highly strung they ...’

‘String themselves up?’ Plant offered.

‘Is that what they believe happened? I thought you said he fell.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘So how did he die?’

‘He fell off his deck onto the rocks.’

‘Unbalanced, like I said.’

‘Did he jump or was he pushed?’ Plant asked.

‘Or did the precarious, ill-maintained rail collapse and he simply tottered forward?’

‘How did you know it was badly maintained?’

‘The obvious assumption. He was a writer. Of sorts. A would-be public intellectual. They never find the time to keep their own lives and property in order. Too busy denouncing the failings of others.’

He fixed Plant with one of those interrogators’ gazes. ‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘Sorry, which question was that?’

‘Did he leave behind some highly charged account of victimisation by the state?’

‘You’d have to ask his solicitor.’

‘I’m asking you,’ said Uncle Toby. ‘So I’ll take that as a yes.’

‘Client confidentiality.’

‘Slater was your client?’

‘Yes.’

‘And now he’s dead.’

‘Yes,’

‘So you no longer have a client.’

‘I suppose I don’t.’

‘Take care. Don’t go leaning on any veranda rails. Unless they’ve been checked by a surveyor first. And even then you’d need to know that you could trust the surveyor.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ Plant said.

‘And no doubt this posthumous document ...’

‘I didn’t say that there was a posthumous document.’

‘This disembodied voice from the grave ...’

‘He was cremated.’

‘This echoing song from the storied urn alleges, no doubt, that his dissidence made him a target of state persecution.’

‘Was he persecuted?’

‘He always claimed so. Wearing his Marxism on his sleeve like a disability.’

‘I didn’t know him that well.’

‘Nor did I, dear boy, but that was his chosen image. One hears things, despite oneself. One closes one’s ears to the scuttlebutt that surrounds one ...’

‘Really?’

‘Selectively,’ Uncle Toby smiled. ‘And I certainly would have preferred Slater to have been selected out of my hearing. But he did go on. Really, for a man of his years he was full of self-pity.’

‘But was it justified?’

‘Kill him for his bad verses?’ asked Uncle Toby.

‘You suggest a purge of the literary world?’

Uncle Toby’s eyes lit up.

‘Wouldn’t that be something,’ he said. ‘What a splendid idea.’

‘And it’s started with Slater?’

‘I should have thought there were more immediately deserving targets.’

‘Got to start somewhere,’ Plant said. ‘Practice shots. Getting the range and all that.’

‘You seem to know about these things.’

‘Not really.’

‘You’re too modest.’

‘I’m sure you know a lot more.’

Uncle Toby smiled.

‘I know one thing,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

'If it was murder, then the state is a most unlikely suspect. Most murders, as I'm sure you know, are domestic. Partners and suchlike. Was he married?'

'Yes.'

'Then there you are.'

'He had a girlfriend too,' Plant said, not in the spirit of transparency and disclosure and the free flow of information, but more in the hope that it would provoke the old bugger.

'I believe they often do.'

Uncle Toby left it unclear as to whether he meant writers or enemies of the state or married heterosexual males.

'Time to go,' he said, dabbing his lips with a paper napkin and rising from the table. He gave his fond farewells, always a bit too much hand clasping and shoulder patting for Plant's taste. He disappeared down the footpath, lost amongst the tourists and holidaymakers, practicing his merging into the crowd routine, perhaps. Girls in bikinis and sarongs, young men in shorts and t-shirts, children clutching inflatable plastic sharks and crocodiles. It was hard to see how he could merge amongst them. But he seemed to manage it. Unless he'd slipped into some unobtrusive doorway of a massage parlour or adult bookshop. Plant was left with an obscure sense of loss, as if he had given away more information than he had received. He wasn't sure that he had received any information at all. Except for the bit about the ill-maintained veranda rail. How had Uncle Toby known that?

'How d'you go with Uncle Toby?' Fullalove asked.

'I don't know that he knew Slater. But he knew enough about him.'

'Of course he knew him,' Fullalove said. 'Look at this.'

He handed across Plant's *Who's Who of Australian Writers*, declared surplus to requirements at the Murwillumbah library and purchased by Plant for fifty cents. James Slater was listed. Had listed himself. Along with a list of his achievements and appointments, such as they were.

And there it was. Writer-in-residence at the Australian Studies centre at Uncle Toby's campus. One of Uncle Toby's power bases, after he engineered it so that Australian Studies expanded from purely literary and historical concerns to include politics and social anthropology and to provide a set of rooms for his lithe young researchers.

‘So Uncle Toby recruited him,’ Plant said.

‘Or tried to recruit him and failed.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Which gave rise to a lifelong enmity and thirty years later Uncle T takes revenge. Not personally of course. Contracted out. All arising from Slater’s brief moment of glory. A writer-in-residence. What more could a writer want?’

‘Sales, royalties, movie deals, television series, perhaps.’

‘And you’ve got to remember that residencies are just a variant of the old honey trap,’ Fullalove continued. ‘But status instead of sex. Much more effective. Slater probably got more than enough sex over the years. But recognition! Acceptance! His name up on a door even if not up in lights. And nothing to do except sing for his supper. Take up residence in the common room and the coffee bars, pouring forth his soul in unpremeditated prose, let it all hang out, tell them everything, his hopes, his aspirations, his agenda, his one man war against evils perpetrated by the state, war, poverty, exploitation, you name it, day after day for a semester, you know what these guys are like, they can’t shut up, and someone’s there listening to it and writing it all down and recording it and that’s all you need.’

‘It still doesn’t explain why they killed him. If they did. Why wait for thirty years? And if you can wait that long, why bother?’

‘They didn’t,’ Fullalove said. ‘They wouldn’t kill him. They might have wanted to find out what he was up to, what he was thinking. But no way would they want to make him a martyr. They don’t want to mobilise dissent by creating a victim of state terrorism. He was much better for them still alive, radical and unsuccessful. A living warning. Much more effective. No, it wasn’t politics, it wasn’t his writings that got him killed. It wasn’t the state.’

‘So who was it?’

‘I still fancy one of the chicks,’ Fullalove grinned, with lascivious ambiguity, licking his lips in what was probably an unconscious gesture.

‘You always say it’s a woman,’ Plant said.

‘*Cherchez la femme*,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘And I'm usually right.’

‘You don’t think you might sound a trifle sexist?’

‘Naaah. Absolutely not. Exac’ly the opposite, in fact. It’s all about empowerment and entitlement. Women are no longer inhibited from entering into roles traditionally the preserve of

men. So, banking, the military and murder, go for it. In the new grand narratives of our time women are figures of power and decision. Murderers and exploiters, not victims.'

'Is that so?'

'Yeah, that's so. Ironic, isn't it?'

'And you actually believe that?'

Fullalove shrugged. 'Well, that's the point about irony, isn't it?'

'What's the point?'

'That you never know. It's the last resort of the alienated, the uncommitted and the disillusioned. Just a matter of intonation. How about that?'

Chapter 30

'This chick,' Fullalove said.

'Who?' Plant asked. He tried to indicate a distance from Fullalove's persistent verbal political incorrectness by a chill tone. Fullalove disregarded it. Maybe never noticed it.

'The one up here. Slater's other woman.'

'What about her?'

'You said he scored from her.'

'So?'

'I might go round there. You want to lend me your wheels?'

'Not really,' Plant said. 'Why do you want to see her?'

'Get some dope. If she was supplying Slater she must have a source. Does she grow it?'

'No idea.'

'Aren't we Mr Squeaky Clean,' Fullalove said. 'Anyway, if she was getting it regularly for Slater, she's lost a customer. I could be just the man she's looking for.'

'Hard to imagine.'

'Wait till she sees the colour of my money.'

'Don't we all?'

'Don't we all what?'

'Wait to see it.'

Fullalove took out his wallet and handed Plant a fifty dollar note.

'What's this?'

'Housekeeping,' Fullalove said, with the contentment of a philanthropist distributing largesse.

'You need a receipt for tax purposes?' Plant asked.

'Could be useful,' Fullalove agreed. 'When you've got time.'

He folded the wallet closed again, not without difficulty, the contents bulging.

'What have you got in there?'

'Be prepared. Cash and carry. Buy in bulk. No problem if she's a grower. The last thing you want to do is draw out a grand from an ATM up here. As bad as writing a cheque. Not that they'd necessarily tie in the transaction with your numberplate they would have recorded the same day driving in some interesting location. But you never know. Known associates and all that ...'

'Sometimes ...' Plant said.

'Yeah, I know, terminate with extreme prejudice. I guess I'm lucky you don't have a veranda rail up here. And it's not a Queenslander. You're on the level. Or the house is, at least.'

He grinned. Something Plant could have done without.

'Let's go, man. Kill two birds while getting stoned. Check her out and buy in bulk. That will soften her up. Cash up front. You think they're all sex and cuddles and spontaneity but what really turns them on, what gets them where they live, is cash up front and property. She's got the property. All she needs is the cash to maintain it.'

The wind chimes chimed on the veranda. Crystals revolved in the gentle breeze, catching rainbow prisms. A carving of the Buddha emanated calm. A dove gave a sustained, peaceful cooing up in the trees. Unless it was someone blowing a pigeon whistle, waiting to lure and slaughter any unsuspecting bird.

'So when Slater used to drive up here,' Fullalove said, 'he used to pick up a stash to take back.'

Olivia smiled sweetly, that say-nothing, peace-love-gentleness look.

'So have you got some I could take back down?'

Her eyes widened.

‘Me?’

‘Yeah, you, sister,’ Fullalove said.

‘I’m not *growing* it,’ she said, all alarm and high moral principle.

‘Of course not,’ Fullalove said. ‘So where did he get it from?’

‘He had a source.’

‘So what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.’

She did hippy incomprehension.

‘So can I get to meet the man?’ Fullalove said, running through his book of idioms.

She gave a hippy pout of doubt.

‘They don’t really like strangers coming round.’

‘I bet they don’t. Be mugs if they did.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’d have to ask.’

‘So ask, would you?’

Even Fullalove registered that he was sounding somewhat terse. Or that he wasn’t getting the desired response. ‘Would that be possible?’ he tried again, as ingratiatingly as he could manage.

She reached for her dope box and her rolling papers. Roll a number and think about it. Universal dope language for something to do when you don’t know what to do. The wind chimes chimed. The dove carried on cooing. There was no sound of rifle fire.

‘I could make a call,’ she offered.

‘Would you, sweetheart?’ Fullalove intoned at his most honeyed.

It nearly blew it. Plant held his breath. Olivia riffled through her handbook of disallowed sexist phrases. She got up and went inside.

They hung out on the veranda drinking herbal tea and having a smoke or two, while Olivia busied herself somewhere in the house.

‘Be cool,’ Fullalove instructed. ‘What else would you be doing? You’d just be sitting on your veranda off your face watching the birds and the bees back at your place. True or false? So what’s the difference? Same birds, same bees.’

‘Not exactly,’ Plant said.

‘Generically,’ Fullalove said. ‘So just enjoy it. It’s not like you’ve got anything else to do.’

‘Is that so?’

‘You can hardly say thinking about who killed Slater, assuming anyone did and he didn’t just fall, is doing anything. Not getting anywhere, is it?’

‘It’s not getting anywhere hanging around here.’

‘So Ms Hippy Chick’s not a suspect?’

Plant shrugged. Never commit yourself on who might be a suspect. Never say someone is or isn’t. Especially when they’re somewhere within earshot. Fullalove got up and walked around, examining the poster of the CND peace symbol and the print of ‘The Peaceable Kingdom’ on the walls.

‘My parents were peace activists,’ she said, coming back out. ‘Nuclear disarmament. Against the Vietnam war. They’d be horrified about how little protest there was about Iraq. About Afghanistan. About Syria. No one cares any more.’

‘Maybe they care but they know there’s nothing you can do,’ Fullalove said. ‘All the polls show most people don’t support the wars.’

‘Yes, maybe,’ she said. ‘It still seems sad there aren’t any of those peace marches.’

‘Just a way to get yourself photographed and put on file.’

‘That’s the sort of thing James used to say. I find that depressing.’

‘It is.’

‘A depressing attitude to have.’

‘I am depressed,’ Fullalove said. ‘Clinically. That’s why I need weed. It’s the only thing that relieves it.’

‘My parents used to say that,’ she said. ‘That’s how they got into it.’

‘Didn’t we all.’

‘Like really into it,’ she said. ‘Breeding special strains.’

‘Special strains?’

‘Well, some is more speedy, some is more sort of soporific, you know, some makes you laugh more, that sort of thing. Well, that’s what they reckoned. They were into all that.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘I’d rather not talk about it.’

She could get away with that, all fragile floral fabrics and cascading curls.

Chapter 31

A mud-spattered Toyota ute came up the driveway, rattling on the rough track, throwing up dust and pebbles, four-wheel-drive, high wheelbase for crossing flooded creeks, lights mounted above the cabin roof. Serious rural business. The driver climbed out. Narrow black jeans, slim fit black shirt, gold necklace, crinkled black hair, and the facial lines and grooves of a long-time smoker. He stood, tall, thin, a silhouette against nature. Plant and Fullalove walked over to him.

'How're you going, mate?' he said, putting out a hand.

Plant shook it, Fullalove shook it, and they headed back to the veranda, the formalities of a former age completed.

'Beautiful spot, innit?'

Olivia emerged from the house.

'This is Plant, this is Fullalove,' she said. She didn't give the man in black's name.

'Jack Herring,' he said.

'They knew James,' she said, before disappearing again.

'Now there's an interesting fellow, how is he?'

'He's dead,' Fullalove said.

'He's not.'

''Fraid so,' Plant said.

'Old Slater, fuckaroo, what happened?'

'He went off his deck. Hit his head on the rocks.'

'Poor old bugger.'

'You knew him,' Plant said, said rather than asked.

'Up to a point. Can't say I knew him well. Bumped into him a few times, when he was up here. Had a chat or two.'

'What about?'

'Oh, this and that,' he said. 'Shit, so he's dead. Well, fancy that.'

'Anyway,' Fullalove said, 'we sort of figured, he won't be buying any more, so if you're still holding, we could maybe ...'

'Take it it off my hands,' he said. He grinned. 'Very considerate of you.'

‘Exac’ly,’ Fullalove said. ‘Least we could do.’

‘How much you looking at?’

Plant tuned out, tried to focus on the mournful dove, as they walked across to the ute.

‘So what did you and Slater talk about?’ Plant tried again, Fullalove having completed his negotiations and settled down with his eyes shut in a corner of the veranda in the sun.

‘Oh, the usual,’ Herring said. ‘Drugs, women, rock’n’roll.’

‘Rock’n’roll?’

‘Yeah.’

‘He was into rock’n’roll?’

‘Not really. More into drugs. It was all about this book he was writing. He wanted to know the whole sorry story about Smackaroo.’

‘You were able to tell him?’

‘Well, up to a point, mate. It was some time ago, but there’s people who are still around.’

‘What people?’

‘The people mixed up in it. They mightn’t have liked it being written about. Not sure I’m that keen myself.’

‘Did you try to stop him?’

‘Stop him? What, from writing it? Not really. I mean, I might have said it could be a bit risky, you know. Stands to reason. Common sense. But not much I could do, was there?’

‘Did you tell anybody?’

‘What, that he was writing it? No. Why would I? Not something I go round talking about.’

‘But you talked to Slater.’

‘Sure. But he already knew about it. It wasn’t like I was telling him stuff he hadn’t heard about. Anyway, who’s to say he’d ever have got it written? Writers, you know, they’ve always got these ideas, but getting it down on paper, that’s something else again. Let alone getting it published. We used to meet these guys, hanging around the band, saying they were going to do this piece for *Rolling Stone* or whatever. Never happened most of the time. You got used to them. Didn’t take them too seriously. So I can’t say I was too worried.’

‘So you never gave it another thought.’

‘Well, one or two, maybe. Like wondering what he was making of it. If he was. What else he’d found out. If anything.’

‘But you weren’t worried?’

‘Why would I be? No skin off my nose, mate. Not as if I was saving it up to write my own memoirs. Maybe I should. If he’s dead, he won’t be writing anything, will he?’

‘I doubt it,’ Plant agreed. ‘So you knew the story?’

‘Well, I was the roadie, wasn’t I?’

‘Were you?’

‘Fucking oath,’ he said.

‘I don’t know much about it,’ Plant said.

‘But you want to know more.’

‘It might help explain a few things about Slater’s death.’

‘What do you mean, explain a few things? What needs explaining?’

‘It’s not clear how he died.’

‘I thought you said he fell off his deck.’

‘Yes, but ...’

Herring looked at him.

‘There’s something you’re not telling me.’

Plant remained impassive.

‘How did you say he died?’

‘He fell off his deck.’

‘Or are you saying he might have been pushed?’

‘I’m not saying anything. I don’t know.’

‘Does anyone know?’

‘No one’s saying.’

‘But they’re looking into it? The cops?’

Plant nodded.

‘Fuckaroo,’ Herring said. ‘Poor old bugger. Who’d want to do that?’

Plant made a ‘who knows?’ gesture with his hands.

‘So what was the story about the band?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, well,’ Herring said, ‘as you no doubt know, we sort of got mixed up with this other business. I mean, a band’s a band. You just want to make music. But it costs. All that sound equipment. Travel. Accommodation. So these guys front up. “We’ll manage you. Take your mind off all that money shit. We’ll look after that, all you’ve gotta do is play.” Sounded great. Well, it was great. Everyone’s happy. Whatever they were doing, they just did it. We just entertained the troops.’

‘What troops?’ Plant asked.

‘Just a manner of speaking. Toured round Australia. Toured round Asia.’

‘And brought heroin back in expensive musical instruments. Or in undeveloped film footage of the tour. And laundered the profits through the band’s takings.’

‘Yeah, well, could be. This was pre-digital. Customs weren’t going to want to rip film canisters open or pull guitars apart, were they? Especially if they’re in on it, which they’d have to be, wouldn’t they?’

‘So there’s dealing going on. Selling at concerts.’

‘Well, maybe like selling it wholesale to people selling it at concerts probably. I don’t know the details. It’s rock’n’roll, innit? The kids come out for a good time. Do a few drugs. Listen to the music. What could be better? Get your shit at the gig. Don’t have to hang out on street corners. Don’t have to deal in dodgy back alleys. That’s what it’s all about. Except it got out of control.’

‘In what way?’

‘In too many ways. The bad E for a start. Kids off their faces. They start brawling. Fights everywhere. Cops called. And it all comes unstuck.’

‘And that’s what happened?’

‘In a nutshell, yes. Without going into detail.’

‘Where did the bad E come from?’

‘That was always the interesting question. It didn’t come from us. Oops. From them, the management. I talked to the boys before they went down. They swore it wasn’t their shit. And I believe them. You can tell by looking at the stuff.’

‘By looking at it?’ Plant asked. ‘How can you tell by looking at it?’

‘The pill presses. This wasn’t any back-yard potting-shed shit. This wasn’t amateur night. This was state of the art pill production.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘There were people who knew. You know. People who’s business it was. You’re in the business, you get an eye for the detail. They had a careful look at these tabs. Professional quality. Very latest equipment.’

‘So?’

‘Well, you’ve got to ask, who would have access to that technology?’

‘And who would?’

‘Search me,’ Herring said.

Plant didn’t take up the invitation. He just looked at Herring. Herring looked back.

‘Did anyone try to find out?’

‘That was what Slater was planning on doing.’

‘And now he’s dead.’

‘Holy shit,’ Herring said. He looked out at the surrounding bush, feeling his jaw between his fingers and thumb. ‘O. K., mate. I’ll tell you what I told Slater. You remember Altamont?’

‘Where the Hell’s Angels were hired for security and someone got killed?’

‘That’s the story. I knew the tour manager. His story was a bit more interesting. Like when they looked at the film footage afterwards, there were all these shaven-headed heavies in bikie gear with baseball bats. No one had ever seen them before. The Hell’s Angels they’d hired didn’t know who they were. They weren’t their people. They hadn’t hired them. No one knew where they came from. And they were wearing these boots. Not bikie boots. These were military style. You with me?

‘And then there’s all these chicks running around selling this bad acid. Same story. Made with state of the art pill presses. It’s mayhem. Kids off their faces on this bad shit. Fights everywhere. Total freak out. And these hoons with baseball bats. Hell on earth.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s two theories. Not incompatible. One is the government decides to stamp out rock concerts. Discredit them. Because this was back in the protest days. The war. Civil rights. Draft resisters. And there’s kids going around collecting money for their gaoled brothers and sisters. The concerts were like a focus for the revolution. Recruitment. So they want to put a stop that that. Turn it ugly. Frighten the kids off. Cut off the support base for the movement.’

‘And the other theory?’

‘This was the one Slater was working on. This one is about drug testing. In the field.’

‘In the field?’

‘You know, like military exercises with live ammunition.’

‘I don’t,’ Plant said, ‘but go on. Who was testing them?’

‘They were,’ Herring said. He put his fingers in the air and waggled the first and second on each hand like inverted commas. ‘“Them.”’

‘“Them”?’

‘Sure,’ Herring said. ‘“Them”.’

‘What do you mean, “them”?’

‘Some agency or other. Military, maybe. Or someone they’ve contracted. A government operation. Obviously. Not that I’d want to be quoted on it. Or on anything else, for that matter. Strictly off the record. Take your pick, basically.’

‘It was big in the Cold War,’ Fullalove said, tuning back in. ‘Testing LSD and stuff. The CIA got in on the act. And the rest of them. The U. S. Navy financed Timothy Leary.’

‘Trying to find a truth drug,’ Herring said.

‘And the rest,’ Fullalove said. ‘Mind control. Remote control assassins. You name it. They were supposed to close it down after a too many people jumped out of windows. But why would it ever stop? Once a bureaucracy always a bureaucracy. Not cool to test drugs on prisoners or mental hospital patients any more. Not cool to admit to testing LSD at all. So the project goes underground.’

‘But that was in the states,’ Plant said. ‘You’re saying it was going on here.’

‘What’s this “was”?’ Fullalove said. ‘Course it is. It would have to be, wouldn’t it. One agency tells another. Sends them a batch of pills. They’re going to want to get in on the act too, aren’t they? Test the latest mind-altering substance at your local weekend rock concert.’

‘So did the band know?’

‘Course not,’ Herring said.

‘What about the management?’

‘What you reckon?’

‘Easy,’ Fullalove said. ‘Someone’s onto the band, local cops or something, who know it’s part of this drug operation. It’s big, it reaches offshore, too big for state police. So they tip off some other agency, drugs or feds or overseas security service. Whoever it is, the agency they tip

off have got their own agenda. They don't bust them. They just lean on them. "We know all about you selling smack, now just cooperate and sell our ecstasy and acid. Profitable lines. We'll tell you when. Which phase of the moon. What longitude and latitude."'

'Not impossible,' Herring agreed.

'So management went along with it?' Plant asked. 'Either that or get banged away?'

'They got banged away, anyway.'

'But maybe not for as long as they might've been.'

'I wouldn't know,' Herring said.

'And you told Slater all this?'

'Some of it. It's not stuff you ever really know. Speculation, most of it. You sort of put two and two together. That's what Slater was doing. He already knew a lot of it and he worked out the rest.'

Herring looked across with soulful eyes.

'I didn't know it was going to get him killed, did I?'

'How do you know it got him killed?' Plant asked.

'Well, I don't, do I? But something did, didn't it?'

'He might just have fallen.'

'Yeah, of course. I didn't think of that. Funny that. Silly me.'

'How many people know this story?'

Herring considered.

'The band. The management. I guess a few partners and groupies got told.'

'So quite a few.'

'A few.'

'So Slater wasn't the only one.'

'Wouldn't think so,' Herring said. 'But he was the only one talking about writing about it, wasn't he?'

'So someone knew he was writing about it?'

'He wasn't exactly keeping it a secret. He told me. He told Olivia. He'd talk about the scene. That way people told him stuff. Or didn't. Depending on what they had to tell. Or hide. But he was cool. He let people know what he was up to. He wasn't like snooping around. That wasn't his style, anyway. He liked to sit and rave and talk.'

‘And listen?’

‘Of course. That’s how he got his material.’

‘So if someone knows he’d been talking to you, doesn’t that put you in danger?’ Plant asked.

‘Depends, doesn’t it? Depends what got him killed. Mightn’t have been anything I told him. He might have found out other stuff.’

‘How would the band feel about all this stuff being stirred up again?’

‘There isn’t any band. It’s all finished. They’re not going to care a shit. Though,’ he said, ‘come to think of it, if the book had come out and got a lot of publicity, they’d probably have got it together again. Done a come-back tour. Maybe Slater’s death ... No, it’s not going to happen.’

Chapter 32

Plant had put in his time at rock concerts. Muddy fields. Torrential downpours. Brutal sound systems. Crushed in crowds. Terror. He might even have heard Smackaroo. Warm-up act for someone he’d gone to hear. Who knew? Who remembered? Who cared? Well, Plant cared, brooding over his morning cup of tea. Hearing loss to show for it.

‘Naaah,’ Fullalove said, ‘that’s from driving with the windows down on long trips. When you were too cheap to get air-conditioning.’

‘Air-conditioning makes me sick.’

‘Well, it can,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘Especially if they’ve put LSD in the tubes and you have it blown all through the car. Nevada gas updated. What a trip. Hallucinations. Off the road. Finish. Easily done. More often than you’d suspect, I suspect.’

‘Is that so?’ Plant said.

‘Most certainly is,’ Fullalove said.

‘And you’ve got evidence of this?’

Fullalove shrugged.

‘You’re as bad as Slater.’

‘I never said he hadn’t got it right,’ Fullalove said.

‘I’m not sure about Jack Herring,’ Plant said.

‘Fancy that,’ Fullalove said.

‘I’d really like to talk to him again.’

‘About what?’

‘About what he isn’t saying.’

‘Could be a long conversation.’

‘He knows more than he’s letting on.’

‘Well, he would, wouldn’t he? If he’s got any sense.’

Plant decided it would be best to drop in on Olivia rather than phoning. Phoning just to ask for someone else’s address, especially an address they weren’t supposed to give out, was not the way to go.

‘Why not?’ Fullalove agreed. ‘Anything to keep your libido happy.’

‘Meaning?’ Plant asked, not that he didn’t know.

‘I see the little flutterings of desire.’

‘Do you, now? And where exactly do you see them?’

‘Well, I couldn’t vouch for her. I’ll keep an eye out for signs. No doubt about you, though. Dead giveaway. Down, wantons, down.’

Olivia gave them a cheery welcome. All fluttering eyelashes and wreaths of smiles. The mournful dove hooting away. Plant hovered in the kitchen as she filled the kettle to make tea. Fullalove grinned from out on the veranda.

‘I really need to see Jack Herring again.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I need to talk to him about Slater.’

‘About what?’

‘I don’t know till I talk to him. I’m trying to get a picture of what was going on.’

‘What was going on?’

‘With Slater. How serious he was about his book. How far he’d got. What he knew. What Jack knew.’

‘Knew about what?’

‘Whatever it was that got him killed.’

‘You don’t think it was an accident?’

She ran her fingers down the side of his chest, lightly, slowly, as if reflectively, in the way a man cannot do to a woman without creating a rumpus. Plant was quite touched. Literally and metaphorically. There was something he found uniquely charming in her behaviour. Stance and deportment. The way she reached out, like that, and then withdrew, like some sea-creature sticking out a filament.

'I don't know what happened,' he said. 'That's why I need to talk to Jack.'

'And why would he know?'

'I don't know that he would. But he might. And since he's around, I ought to talk to him.'

The kettle whistled on the stove as she boiled more water for more tea.

'Do you have his mobile number?'

'He doesn't have a mobile. There's no reception where he is,'

'Land line?'

She wrinkled her nose.

'I'll give him a call,' she said.

'I can do it.'

'No,' she said. She poured the boiling water into the teapot. 'He doesn't like the number being given out.'

'Why not?'

She pulled a face, meaning it's bleeding obvious why not so why ask, and took the tray out to the veranda.

Fullalove had a couple of joints rolled waiting for them. She picked one up and lit it and went back inside to the phone, standing there between Plant and the handset so he couldn't see the number she punched in. She stood there a while, receiver to her ear, sucking on the joint and holding the smoke in.

'Not there,' she said, coming back out.

'Or not answering,' Fullalove said. 'And no doubt he doesn't have an answering machine.'

'No,' she said, 'he doesn't.'

'Wise guy,' Fullalove said approvingly. 'Doesn't want anyone leaving messages that can be hacked into. Like putting in an order for a kilo of sinsemilla. Very professional.'

She wouldn't give them the address.

'You can't see it from the road. You wouldn't be able to find it.'

'We could give it a go,' Fullalove assured her.

But she refused.

'I'll get him to call you,' she said.

It was as far as she would go. Which could be interpreted as suspicious, or as honourable.

'Well, take your pick,' Fullalove said as they drove away. 'Give me suspicion.'

'Do you need more suspicion?'

'You can never have too much.'

'So what now?'

'We could ask around,' Fullalove suggested. 'Somebody's bound to know him.'

'Do we want to alert him?'

'He's already alerted.'

'Maybe.'

` 'You talked to him,' Fullalove said. 'Of course he's alerted.'

'So what do we do? How do I find him'

'I told you, ask around. Someone up here's bound to know him. If you don't like that, look him up on the internet. You'll probably find something.'

'Or nothing.'

'In which case that would tell you everything.'

'You getting into Zen?' Plant asked. 'The ambience up here getting to you?'

'If there's nothing there that means he's a very careful man. Very wise.'

'Or paranoid.'

'Like I said, very wise.'

'So,' Plant said, 'what do we do?'

'Drive into Mullumbimby.'

'Why?'

'Just do it. He's got a land line. All will be revealed.'

Plant did it.

'The Post Office,' Fullalove specified.

Plant waited while Fullalove went into a phone box outside the Post Office, pen and paper in hand. He came back and read out an address.

'Not that paranoid if he's in the phone book,' Plant said.

'Maybe. Or maybe very paranoid and very wise. Wise enough not to go ex-directory and look like he's paranoid.'

They drove back the way they had come and on through the back roads, macadamia plantations, avocado orchards, old dairy farms. They found the gate. No number on it. But the gateway before and the gateway after both had numbers. A simple matter of deduction and arithmetic that the unnumbered one was Herring's. It was padlocked. A sign said beware of the dogs. Dogs in the plural. Another sign said 'Say No to Gas Seam Mining' and another said 'Lock the GATE. To Coal and Gas Companies Warning: Trespass is an offence. Entrance to this property is only by invitation or prior appointment'. They all said that now, and were all padlocked, to keep surveyors off their land. Not that in the end it would. The fence was wire, no broken strands or leaning posts, well maintained for the country where nature wrought a perpetual campaign of decay and return to its primal state. A sign warned that it was electrified. There was no sign of any cattle or other stock. A track stretched away from the road and out of sight, lost behind thick woodland.

'Check the camera,' Fullalove said, pointing it out, an unobtrusive pole amidst the trees, angled towards the gate.

'Now he'll know we're onto him.'

'Not necessarily. He'll just think we want more dope. Or we're making a social call.'

Plant was unconvinced.

A distant barking was the only sound. Serious barking.

Chapter 33

They sat in a riverside reserve near the coast, eating a long, lingering lunch of fresh, unfrozen, unimported local fish and chips.

'So,' Plant said reflectively, 'what do you reckon?'

‘About what?’ Fullalove asked, mouth full of battered flathead, watching the seagulls squabbling and squawking, the occasional pelican lumbering around.

‘It seems to be a choice.’

‘Oh yes?’

‘Between testing drugs at rock concerts and using drugs to narcotise dissidents. He knew too much. One or the other story got him killed.’

‘That’s a choice?’ Fullalove asked.

‘Meaning?’

‘They sound like the same story to me. It’s all drugs. It’s all secret agencies. So why would one be more likely to get him bumped off than the other?’

‘Maybe it was the combination.’

‘Maybe it was neither.’

‘So what was it that got him killed?’

‘Look,’ Fullalove said, ‘let’s say for the sake of argument there is a “they”.’

‘A “they”?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘Them. The unnameable. The fucking Illuminati.’

‘You believe in the Illuminati now?’

‘Look,’ Fullalove said again, ‘it doesn’t matter what they’re called. Let’s for the sake of argument hypothesise that there’s an all powerful agency testing drugs on unsuspecting party animals and narcotising dissidents. What are they doing it for? Control. Covert control. So why would they bump off someone and attract attention to what they were doing?’

‘He was threatening to publish.’

‘Who was going to publish his delusional ramblings?’

‘So you’re saying he was delusional now?’

‘No, mate,’ Fullalove said, waving a potato chip, ‘I’m saying his ramblings sounded delusional. So why bother to bump him off? Bump him off and it sounds like he was onto something. Leave him alone and he sounds like your average loony. Plus,’ Fullalove added, holding up another chip and shaking it at Plant to emphasise his point, ‘that way he might frighten off any other loonies. The point about the security services is to make things secure.

Best way to do that is through fear. If Slater was going around saying old lefties are being poisoned in their beds at night, that's perfect. Sends a frisson of fear through the whole community. Makes them all paranoid. Which is the point. They want these rumours spreading around, that's how you control people. Slater was doing their job for them.'

'Consciously?'

'No, not consciously, the man was possessed.'

'Possessed by what?'

'Paranoia. He'd been driven mad. End of story. Why kill him and draw attention to what they've been doing? Just leave him raving on. The only people who believe him are the rest of the loony left.'

'The left are all loonies, now?'

'Pretty much. Insofar as there are any. They've all been driven mad like Slater. Totally paranoid. Fearful. Convinced they're under constant surveillance. Being poisoned by shellfish toxins. Too terrified to go out of the house. Too terrified to go on the internet. Perfect.'

'Maybe,' Plant said. 'What about the drug testing story?'

'What about it? You could never prove it. Just adds a thrill to an evening out. You could be getting the very latest psychoactive product from the heart of the CIA. Or the adrenal gland. Why would that worry anyone? Word of mouth advertising. Again, Slater's just doing their job for them. Or was.'

'Till he got killed.'

'So why would they kill him when he was doing their work? They like people to know what they're up to. Makes people paranoid. They don't care a shit any more whether anyone finds out what they're doing. Which makes them more frightening and dangerous in one way, but less likely to kill to protect their secrets, which they're proud of and seem to want to promote rather than conceal.'

'So who did kill him?'

'*Cherchez la femme*, I always say,' Fullalove said, yet once more.

He threw a handful of chips at the waiting seagulls. There was a flurry of activity, fluttering, squabbling, squawking as they fought over the bounty. Fullalove tossed them another handful.

'Your little friend.'

‘What little friend?’ Plant asked.

‘The organic Olivia.’

‘She’s not my little friend.’

‘But oh how nice it would be if she were. I can read body language.’

He reached out an arm and extended the fish and chip stained fingers towards Plant’s chest.

‘Lay off,’ Plant said.

‘Lay on, Macduff,’ Fullalove countered. ‘Such a sweet little thing.’

‘What about her?’

‘Is she as squeaky clean as she presents herself? All vegetarian soap and tea-tree oil shampoo? So fragrant. She seems quite comfortably set up for one who seems not to be gainfully employed.’

‘She inherited from her parents.’

‘Is that so?’

‘So she says. Hippy patrimony.’

‘How do we know her parents are dead?’

‘Why would she lie? She’s got the house. We’ve been to it.’

‘Maybe they’re just banged away somewhere. Doing time in the timeless land.’

‘Why?’

‘Cultivating and supplying,’ Fullalove suggested.

‘She doesn’t seem to be growing it, if you remember. You got her to call Jack Herring.’

‘Well, she wouldn’t, would she, if Mummy and Daddy got busted. They’ve moved production down the valley.’

‘Meaning?’

‘To Herring, obviously. Who just happens to be roadie to the band that was part of a supply and money-laundering operation. Maybe the band were growing stuff too. Vertical integration. Makes sense. Keeps it all close and under wraps.’

‘Except it wasn’t under wraps if her parents got busted.’

‘It’s a hypothesis,’ Fullalove said.

‘Can’t dispute that. But is it true? Let alone probable.’

‘We’ll have to see, won’t we?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It could be little Miss unpitted Olive might have a motive for pushing your mate over the rail. Maybe he was getting too close to mummy and daddy’s story. They mightn’t even be in gaol. Just hiding out somewhere.’

‘Hostages to a defunct rock’n’roll group,’ Plant offered.

‘Stranger things have happened.’

‘I’m sure you’d know of them. But spare me. Don’t tell me.’

‘Maybe he was just bonking her in the course of his researches, as they used to put it. Trying to find out more about the band and where her parents fitted in. And then she realises what he’s up to, that it isn’t true love, and wham, bam, over the rainbow, there he goes.’

Chapter 34

Olivia phoned. Plant picked up.

‘Could I hitch a lift back to Sydney with you?’ she asked.

How could he refuse?

‘When are you going?’

‘I’m still trying to see Jack Herring,’ he said.

‘Oh, he’s already there.’

‘Where?’

‘Sydney.’

‘What’s he doing there?’ he asked.

Stupid question.

‘Things,’ she said. ‘I’ll tell him you’re trying to get in touch.’

‘And don’t pretend you’re not thrilled to the core or to whatever it is you’ve got down below,’ Fullalove said.

‘Why’s she want to go to Sydney, anyway?’ Plant asked.

‘Not to see Slater, obviously.’

‘Obviously.’

‘Why didn’t you ask her? Not that she’d necessarily tell you the truth. Best way to find out is to give her a lift. Keep your enemies close to you.’

‘I don’t think she’s an enemy.’

‘Well you wouldn’t, would you? But the best way to find out is to keep her under surveillance.’

‘Why would she be an enemy?’

‘Suspect, then.’

‘I don’t see her as a suspect.’

‘Well you wouldn’t, would you?’ Fullalove said again. ‘But you never know, do you?’

Plant did his not deigning to reply number. No need to agree. But no, the one thing you knew for certain was that you never did know.

When it came to it, Plant was less than ecstatic about giving Olivia a lift. It was bad enough transporting Fullalove’s bulk purchase.

‘Just make sure it’s hidden away in your luggage, and not loose in the back of the car,’ he’d pleaded.

‘No worries. I’ll squeeze it in along with her,’ Fullalove assured him, giving his hideous, substantially toothless grin.

Why did she have to dress like a dope smoking hippy? Couldn’t she have done a female William Burroughs just to drive down Pacific Highway. Off the rack business suit. Anonymous. Ordinary. But no, she had to sit in the back seat passing joints back and forth to Fullalove. He’d offered her the front seat, but Fullalove had already occupied it and Olivia had said she was happier in the back, didn’t feel like she was driving there and braking with her foot all the time.

‘How do you usually get down?’ Plant asked her.

‘Sometimes I drive. Sometimes I get a lift. Last time I came down with Jack Herring.’

‘In his ute?’

‘No, in my car. He hitched a ride so to speak.’

‘So to speak?’

She nodded.

Why do I have no fucking idea what she means? Plant wondered.

‘When was that?’ he asked.

‘It was when James ...’ She faltered.

‘You were there when he died?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Well, yes, I was in Sydney. But I wasn’t there when it happened. I went back that day.’

‘Which day?’

‘I didn’t realise it at the time. But it was the day he died.’

‘The day he fell or the day he was discovered.’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I don’t know.’

‘Where were you staying?’

‘I was house-sitting. The people were coming back later that day. So I left first thing. I’d cleaned up the day before.’

‘So when did you last see Slater?’

‘The day before. He came over and we ...’

She tailed off and turned to look through the side windows. Bush and more bush.

‘We spent the afternoon together. Then he went back to the island and I cleaned up and packed and left the next morning. First thing. It’s a long drive.’

‘I know,’ Plant said. ‘I’m driving it now.’

‘Of course, sorry.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about.’

But she was sorry about all of it, snuffling on a tissue, falling into silence.

‘You didn’t take him back to the ferry?’

‘No. He had his own car.’

‘Did you see anyone after he left?’

‘I don’t think so. I didn’t go out.’

‘No take-away food?’

‘No,’ she said, almost indignantly, food purity paramount. ‘No, I didn’t go out.’

‘What about Herring? Did he go back up with you?’

‘No, he was staying down.’

‘Where?’

‘Somewhere in the city.’

‘He didn’t say where?’

‘No.’

Fullalove passed a joint across to the back seat. Plant could feel the clutch of fear around his heart. He opened the windows to let the smell out. Hopefully Highway Patrol cars were not yet equipped with smoke detectors.

‘What about some music?’ she said. She’d handed Fullalove a CD from her bag before anyone could respond. Local Northern Rivers group. World Music.

At least it stopped Fullalove from surfing through the country music stations, Plant told himself.

‘The impression I got,’ Plant said, ‘was that Slater was a political animal.’

Olivia sniffed some more. Maybe it was from the dust and exhaust fumes and pollen coming in from the open windows. Or maybe it was from the chill of the air-conditioning. Plant alternated between the two. Or maybe it was the mention of Slater making her tearful.

‘Not really,’ she said. ‘Well, I suppose so. He could seem like that.’

‘Seemed so to me,’ Plant said.

‘But he’d only got political because of his beliefs,’ she said.

‘Beliefs?’ Plant said.

‘His pacifism,’ she said. ‘That was what got him into it. He was like my parents.’

‘That’s why you liked him?’ Fullalove asked.

‘Could be,’ she said. ‘I hadn’t really thought of it.’

‘In what way was he like them?’ Plant asked.

‘They were basically peace activists. Anti-war. Nuclear disarmament. They got into political stuff because of their beliefs.’

‘And you’re saying Slater was like that.’

‘Yes.’

‘Was he religious?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Really?’ Fullalove said. ‘How can you be sort of religious?’

‘Well, he wasn’t like a Quaker or something. But he wasn’t anti-religious. Not like those professional atheists.’

‘But he wasn’t a Christian?’ Plant asked.

‘Or a Muslim?’ Fullalove added.

‘He talked about reincarnation sometimes,’ she said.

‘Ah, a Buddhist,’ Fullalove said, specialist in comparative religious studies.

‘He used to speculate about what he must have done in a past life to deserve this one.’

‘Go on,’ Plant said. He knew that speculation.

‘You know, suffering for his beliefs from century to century. He thought he must have been some sort of spy-master.’

‘When?’

‘Oh, ages ago. The Civil War.’

‘A Confederate general,’ Fullalove offered.

‘No. The English Civil War. Elizabethan times.’

‘They were different centuries,’ Fullalove said.

‘Probably in both,’ she said. ‘He used to say the reason he was interested in spy stuff was because he must have been in it.’

‘So was he in it?’ Plant asked.

‘In a previous lifetime,’ she said. ‘Or lifetimes.’

‘So that makes him a Buddhist,’ Fullalove persisted.

‘Not necessarily,’ she said. ‘Lots of systems believe in reincarnation.’

‘Do they?’

‘Not just Buddhists,’ she said. ‘He didn’t belong to any particular system.’

‘But he believed in something.’

‘Well, he didn’t believe in Darwin. Natural selection and all that. Survival of the fittest.’

‘Don’t tell me he was a creationist,’ Fullalove said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He said it was no less likely than big bangs or primal swamps.’

‘Or did he just say these things to you?’ Plant asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, could he be different things to different people? Reincarnation up in Hippyville. Political activist in the big smoke.’

‘They’re not incompatible positions,’ she said. ‘With James it was always about possibilities. He’d come out with these theories. They were like stories. Like his conspiracy theories. Whether he actually believed any of it ...’

‘But he believed in the politics.’

‘Pretty much. Though he was getting pretty disillusioned.’

‘What about you?’ Fullalove asked. ‘Are you a political activist?’

‘Me?’

‘You.’

‘I don’t know anything about politics.’

‘Really?’

‘Quiz me,’ she said. ‘You’ll soon see.’

Fullalove quizzed her as Plant crawled down the highway, stuck behind caravans and Winnebagos and utes towing boats and four-wheel drives encrusted with surfboards and bicycles. Who was the prime minister? Who was the deputy prime minister? The leader of the opposition? How many American bases are there in Australia? How many Australian bases are there in America? Who committed Australian military forces to Korea? Who committed Australian military forces to Malaya? Who committed Australian military forces to Vietnam? Who committed Australian military forces to the Gulf war? Who committed Australian military forces to Afghanistan? Who committed Australian military forces to Iraq? Who committed Australian military forces to Syria?

‘Drop me off at Central Station,’ she said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘It’s easier. Saves you getting stuck in traffic. You don’t want to have to do that after that long drive. It really is very good of you. I’m really grateful.’

‘It’s no problem,’ Plant said.

It was. He wanted to know where she was staying.

But she smothered him with expressions of gratitude and it would have been churlish to insist.

He insisted but she was adamant.

‘I’ll give you a call,’ she said, hopping out of the car at Central.

‘Tough little cookie, isn’t she?’ Fullalove observed.

Chapter 35

Back in Sydney, Plant called Celia. The answer-machine cut in after half a dozen rings.

'Plant,' Plant said. 'Just calling,' he said, which was redundant, since he obviously was. He tried to be a man of few words, but spare ones regularly slipped out.

Celia picked up the phone.

'Gotcha,' she said.

'Plant,' Plant said again.

'Yeah, I got that.'

'Just calling,' he added.

'I got that too.'

'There we are then,' he said.

'Where?' she asked.

'Well, I'm back in town.'

'Yippee,' she said, possibly satirically, it seemed to Plant.

'I wanted to have a talk with you.'

'So come up and visit, why don'tcha?'

'If that's all right.'

'You can give me a report,' she said. 'And anything else you might care to bring.'

Chocolates, flowers, sex, he thought to himself. All three, maybe?

'Was that too forward?' she asked. 'Have I turned you tongue-tied?'

'When?' he asked. 'When's a good time to come?'

'When's a good time for a good time?' she asked. 'Whenever.'

She was sunning herself on the deck when he arrived. *Au naturel*, naturally. The door was open and he walked in, calling out 'Knock, knock' as a sort of advance warning, in case she was busy boiling uo books, not to create embarrassment. She wasn't, either busy or embarrassed. She got up from the recliner and picked up a sarong to wrap around her waist and slipped her arms into a white cotton shirt. She left it unbuttoned.

'So what have you got to show me?' Celia asked, as if it was a case of I've shown you mine, now you show me yours. But it mightn't have been that at all. This was not an

unambiguous instruction to Plant to unzip. At least he didn't think it was. Just some sort of ambiguous titillation or torture she loved to hand out. There were worse things in life.

'Show you?' Plant said. 'Not a lot.'

She made one of those snorting noises, which could have been contemptuous, or just a matter of clearing the sinuses.

'So where have you been?' she asked. 'As if I can't guess.'

'Up the coast,' he said.

'Up the coast,' she said, derisively. 'Do we mean by that Byron fucking Bay?'

'Close enough.'

'Seeing that slut of his? Mullumfuckingbimboland?'

'You know Olivia, then.'

'The happy hippy hooker? Of course I do. All too well.'

He couldn't think of any easy way to put it. 'How did you feel about that?' he asked.

'Feel?' she said, giving the question of tactility an erotic charge that quite startled Plant. Like bumping against one of those electrified fences Jack Herring had round his property.

'That brainless bonker. She was his dope source, that's all. He was using her. She thought it was true love. It was. But for the dope, not her. Wedded to the weed. He was a fucking addict, even you must have spotted that.'

'Not really,' Plant said. After all, what was addiction?

'Well, I'm telling you now that he was. Rotted his brain. Why do you think he was stuck on all those conspiracy theories?'

Because he saw it like it was, Plant could have said. But that may not have been how she saw things. He kept it simple and just asked 'Why?'

'Because he was stoned all the time. That's why he fell off the deck. Too stoned to stand up. His brain was addled. Like his genitals. Jock itch, I ask you. Fungus of the fucking frontal lobes. Anyway, enough of that. How are your investigations? Have your researches borne fruit?'

'I don't know,' Plant said.

'Is that all you have to say? Is that it?'

'Pretty much.'

'I'm putting some clothes on,' she said, leaving the deck and going indoors. His punishment for lack of progress. Anyway, he was making progress. It was just that he hadn't

progressed far enough. He was on track, but had yet to reach his destination. And anyway, hadn't she refused to hire him? Why should he tell her anything?

'Did Slater give you any material when you saw him?' she called out from inside the house.

'Material?' Or maybe materiel.

'Documents,' she suggested.

'What sort of documents?'

'Any sort.'

Plant thought. Did she know of the existence of the document Olivia had given him? Did she have her own copy?

'Surely you know,' she said.

'Yes, sure,' Plant said. 'No, no he didn't.'

'What took you so long?'

'I was thinking.'

'About what?'

'No much,' Plant conceded. 'What sort of documents do you have in mind?'

'I don't have any in mind.'

'Ah,' Plant said. 'I thought you might have been thinking of something specific.'

'Why?'

'Because you asked if Slater had given me anything.'

'So he didn't.'

'No, he didn't.'

'He didn't even give you any of his books?'

'No.'

'Really?'

She emerged from the bedroom in jeans and shirt. Shirt buttoned. Though not right up.

'I can't believe it. He must have been really stoned. Usually he foists his mouldering remainders onto anyone within reach.'

She went into another room, disregarding the bookshelf. A musty smell emerged from the open door. She came out with a couple of books.

'Thank you.'

‘My pleasure. Anything to get rid of them. There’s boxes of them in there. Even the water-taxi driver asked him had he ever thought of selling them. That was when he tried using them as barter for a taxi fare.’

She handed them to him.

‘They may help you with your researches.’

‘Thank you.’

‘They may even advance your investigations.’

‘You think?’

‘They might show you how he ended up like he did.’

‘Ended up how?’

‘Oh Plant, stop being coy. Not getting published any more.’

‘You believe he was being blacklisted?’

‘Oh yes, I can believe it,’ she said. ‘I don’t know if he was actually blacklisted, but he was certainly getting the treatment. But you know, that’s just the industry. What he was saying wasn’t what people want to hear any more. Or what publishers want to publish, more to the point. His politics were out of fashion. The market’s all about fashion. And literature’s all about the market. And he wasn’t a significant player in the market. So. He wasn’t unique in that. A lot of writers get shed.’

‘Writers like him?’

‘Yes, writers like him. Market forces, you know. He thought publishing should’ve been above all that sort of thing. So, yes, he was seriously fucking delusional. But, like I say, he wasn’t unique in thinking that, either. The world changed. The old values went. Insofar as they ever existed. But that’s not what got him killed. It was the dope.’

‘The book he was planning to write?’

‘No, not that or any other book. Why does it always have to be a book? Forget books. The dope killed him. He was stoned and fell. It’s just a wonder it hadn’t happened before. He’d get totally wiped out and then he’d be blundering around, tripping over things, until he bombed out. He was an old pot-head.’

‘But his paranoia was justified?’

‘Well, he was certainly being excluded. For whatever reason.’

‘Political?’

‘Easily. His views. His manner. His refusal to compromise.’

‘So you didn’t try to argue with him?’

‘About what?’

‘Well, whether he was being blocked by some secret agency or other.’

‘No, of course I didn’t. How would I know?’

‘So you didn’t discourage his belief?’

‘Why would I?’

‘Did you encourage him?’

‘What are you after, Plant?’

‘Just trying to get my bearings.’

‘No balls, though.’ She laughed. ‘As in ball bearings,’ she added. ‘Look, Plant, yes he was pissed off about the way he was treated. But not to the extent of killing himself. He was just stoned. Sure, he got stoned to cope with being pissed off. So in that sense I suppose it killed him.’

‘Indirectly.’

‘Whatever.’

‘But he wasn’t actually pushed by someone?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Why would he be?’

‘Because of what he was planning on writing about.’

‘He was writing about that rock group.’

‘Which was going to get him killed, you told me.’

‘Well, it might have done if it had ever got published and if he hadn’t died first. Who knows?’

‘How much had he written? Do you have a copy?’

‘Written? You’re joking. He never got round to it.’

‘Never got round to it?’

‘It was all talk.’

‘He hadn’t written anything?’

‘No.’

‘Really?’

‘Would I lie to you? If I had it wouldn’t I be trying to sell it to raise some money?’

‘Did his novels make much money?’

She didn’t bother to reply to that, just grunted.

‘So there’s nothing on his computer? No print out?’

‘No. It was all in his addled head. He hadn’t started it. Said he was still collecting information.’

Plant wondered. Some writers started writing while they were still researching. Others waited till they had assembled everything they wanted to write about before they began. He had no idea which category Slater had belonged to. The latter, from what Celia said. But was that true?

‘What about his chemical poisoning theory?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, he had hundreds of theories. None of it’s relevant now, nothing is. James is dead. I don’t want to talk about it. Just leave him in peace.’

It could have been heartfelt.

Plant nodded.

‘Understood.’

Though he wasn’t sure that he understood any of it.

Chapter 36

Plant was back at Mac Arber’s. He could have done an internet search, of course. Come tell us what you’re investigating, click here. So he didn’t. He preferred physical searches. Down to the library. But the university library had put most of its books into storage and filled the emptied space with coffee lounges and internet terminals, and you couldn’t just walk in there and look, you had to have a library card and you had to order up books electronically, and again every request was monitored and recorded. Distaste for seeing the destruction of the library kept him away. Which impeded his researches. That was how the system worked.

So it was back to Glebe and Mac Arber’s. No less monitored, Mac Arber peering across from the cash register and threatening to join him and make body contact. Peter Pears singing Benjamin Britten’s arrangements of English folk songs coming through the sound system.

‘You know,’ Mac Arber said, ‘I’ve been thinking.’

‘Good for you.’

‘All this talk of the death of the novel. I’ve thought of a way to put literature back on the front pages.’

‘Front pages of what?’ Plant asked. ‘I thought newspapers were as dead as the novel.’

‘A manner of speaking,’ Mac said.

Plant stooped amongst the shelves, bent, bowed, uncomfortable in the foggy, foggy dew.

‘Drug testing for literary prizes,’ Mac said. ‘Why should it all be reserved for cyclists and footballers and Olympic athletes? Why should they have all the scandals? They’re mere dabblers, after all. Look at the writers.’

Ginsberg’s Ode to LSD. Aldous Huxley taking a tab on his death bed. Auden taking Benzedrine for breakfast every day for twenty years. Sartre swigging it down with whisky. Kerouac, Orson Welles, all into Benzedrine. Bulwer Lytton smoking opium. Like Graham Greene. Wilkie Collins, Henry Kendall, Adam Lindsay Gordon, all sucking up the laudanum.

‘Writers are so much more committed than those boring athletes. Look at the drugs they’ve consumed. As indeed you are.’

‘As indeed I am what?’

‘Searching along the drug shelves. Burroughs. Coleridge. De Quincey. Who in particular are you after? Or are you just hoping for a free contact high? Like free Wi-Fi.’

Plant stood up.

‘Are you sure you’re happy just reading about it?’

Plant had never been sure about the full nature of Mac Arber’s business. The essence of late capitalism was all dealing. Dealerships. Networks. The product was immaterial. Once you had the structure you could push any product through. Books. Pornography. Drugs. Internet search corporations moving to banking. Publishers moving to education packages. Booksellers moving from coffee to groceries.

He dug out a battered paperback on LSD in America. History, development, distribution, testing, military and intelligence applications. It was all there, or some of it. No doubt there was more untold than told. Experiments in the fifties. Prisoners. Enlisted men. Intelligence professionals. Slipped a tab of acid without warning and then watched as they went off their faces. Infiltration of counter-cultural parties, hey man, try this shit, makes you fly. If it wasn’t all there, there was enough there to make it clear. Slater might have been on to something.

Except that all that CIA and military drug research was supposed to have stopped decades back. And Slater had gone off his deck a month ago.

'You know,' Mac declared, 'I think they should make drug-testing part of all the literary awards ceremonies. Line the writers up in the starting paddock. Veterinary surgeons with huge syringes taking blood, pushing back the lips of the literary lions for saliva samples. You could have sniffer dogs in the aisles, sniffing the writers. Canvas screens, that worthy by-product of the hemp plant, could offer some privacy for the urine tests. Though there again public pissing might have its appeal. It would bring in that old play on pens and penises. Who's the mightiest of us all? I think it would be a winner. Great television. Perhaps I should make a proposal to the Australia Council. Get public funding. What do you think?'

'Go for it,' Plant said.

'Maybe you should open up your bottom drawer, see what deranged droolings you've got festering away down there. One of those prizes for an unpublished manuscript. You never know.'

Plant emerged from between the shelves like a Lincolnshire poacher, but without the concealed pockets in which to hide his spoils.

'So what little project are we working on here?' Mac asked, examining Plant's purchase with the care of a butcher fondling dead rabbits.

'Client confidentiality,' Plant said.

'Pull the other one. No such thing. You know that.'

'All kiss and tell round here, is it?'

'If only,' Mac said. 'Not that poor man who fell off his veranda. You're not still working on that.'

'I don't propose to tell you anything,' Plant said.

'Such a strange fellow. Totally paranoid.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, it was obvious, how could you miss it? He'd come in here to buy something. He'd pretend he was just browsing, just like you, but I can tell. You reminded me of him. That look in the eye. That intensity of fixed purpose. But he'd pretend to have just found something by accident. Then he'd hone in on what he'd come for. Then there'd be another little flutter of false

surprise and he'd pick up some other piece of nonsense, and come to the counter. You could always tell what he'd come for. It would be the book sandwiched in the middle.'

'What sort of book?'

'Like the one you have in your hot little hand. Always the same. Conspiracy. Secrets of the CIA. Inside Mossad. You know the sort of thing.'

'Do I?'

'Like your mate Fullalove's acquisitions. You must let me know when he decides to sell up. Must be quite a collection by now.'

'Is that so?'

'From the amount he's bought off me. Fullalove, Slater, hard to say which was the crazier. But excellent for business. All those books they bought to try and conceal what they were really interested in buying. Moved a lot of dead stock for me.'

'And now you want to buy it all back from Fullalove.'

'Some of it. The good stuff. And for a good price.'

'Meaning a low one.'

'What else?' Mac said, his hands spread wide. 'One has to live.'

'You reckon?'

'Just for that unkindness I won't give you a discount.'

'You've never given me a discount.'

'Haven't I?' Mac said. 'Ah well, you can always live in hope.'

Plant opened the door to leave. The little bell tinkled.

'Tell Mrs Slater if she wants to sell her husband's collection to give me a call.'

'I don't think they were married.'

'That's not a problem,' Mac said, graciously.

Out on the pavement Plant stopped. The grime of exhaust fumes and the dark emanations of the university cast their pall over the mean streets. He went back in. The irritating little bell gave its horrid tinkling again.

'Back so soon,' Mac beamed. 'You do know how to raise a chap's hopes.'

'How did you know I knew Mrs Slater?'

'I thought you just said he wasn't married.'

'Celia,' Plant said.

‘On first name terms, are we?’ He gave one of his distasteful clucking noises, like a frog in a stormwater drain. ‘Slater was a customer. Not frequent, but consistent. Drugs and conspiracies were his thing. You come in and buy a couple of books by Slater. A week later Slater falls on his head. Next thing, you come in and buy a drug book. Indeed a drug conspiracy book. Identical to one Slater bought a few weeks back, though a grubbier copy. Ergo, given your line of work, there would seem to be some identity of interest here. It seemed a fair assumption that you are still interested in Slater and, since he’s dead, to pursue that interest you would probably need to be in contact with the widow. Though of course if they weren’t married perhaps we should call her the relict rather than the widow.’ He stopped and smiled. ‘That satisfy you?’

‘I’ll think about it,’ Plant said. He held up his purchase. ‘Slater bought this?’

‘Would I lie to you?’

‘Probably.’

‘Then you’ll never know, will you.’

‘I’ll just have to believe.’

‘Won’t you just,’ Mac Arber smiled.

Plant made a cup of tea, put Chet Baker on the CD player, opened the history of LSD, and settled down to the gentle pleasures of research. No doubt about it, the research and development of LSD had sometimes been less than gentle. Unsuspecting subjects leaping out of windows. Field trials without anyone being asked to sign a consent. Or even knowing there was a trial going on. It took him back to trips he had taken. Unsuspectingly accepting gifts from generous souls he scarcely knew, here, try this acid, even from souls he did know, but whose access to state of the art psychedelics he never thought to question. Where did it come from? No one ever asked. Not in Plant’s experience. How trusting we were, he reflected. How trusting we probably still are. Except no one of his surviving acquaintance was going round offering free drugs any more.

It was all fascinating material. A trip down memory lane, only disrupted by Fullalove’s return from the mean streets.

‘What’s this shit, then?’ Fullalove asked, taking the book from Plant’s hands.

‘I was checking up on Slater’s reading.’

Fullalove flicked through the pages.

‘Nothing new here,’ he said.

‘It’s an old book. Doesn’t mean it’s not true.’

‘Doesn’t mean it is, either. Doesn’t matter. It’s all in print. Part of the official record. Why would you bother with it?’

‘To see what Slater was up to when he got killed.’

‘Well he didn’t get himself killed by recycling 1950s history from second-hand paperbacks.’

‘He might.’

‘If that was the best he could do, he wouldn’t have been going to be making any great revelations.’

‘He could still be a nuisance.’

‘So they’d keep him on a watch list of nutters and dissidents. But just think how many of them there are. They can’t start bumping them all off, there’s too many of them.’

‘I guess not.’

‘Look, this stuff’s all known and all in print. Anyone can access it. Why’s it going to get Slater killed when it’s so easily available?’

‘I guess it isn’t.’

‘There you are then. You better hot foot it down to Mac Arber’s which is no doubt where you got it, and try and sell it back to him. Unless you want to donate it to me.’

‘You said it was all stuff you knew.’

‘Sure. But just for the sake of completeness. You never know. And what about those remaindered copies of Slater’s books his missus gave you?’

‘What about them?’

‘I’ll take them, too, if you want to get rid of them. You never know, they could end up worth something.’

‘I seem to remember your saying that life was too short to read a novel.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But you want my copies of Slater’s.’

‘Not to read,’ Fullalove explained. ‘As an investment. A speculation. In case someone writes a book about him sometime and he becomes famous. Victim of the Secret State.’

‘I’ll hang on to them, thanks. They’re good, what I’ve read of them.’

‘Fair enough. You said she said she’d got boxes of them. I might give her a call, offer to take them off her hands.’

‘You really are the soul of generosity, Fullalove.’

Fullalove expressed hurt.

‘For a price, mate. For a price. Do I look like the sort of person who’d take advantage of a grieving widow?’

‘What can I say to that?’

‘Just say the truth.’

‘I think you and the widow would be equally well matched in any attempt to take advantage of each other, grieving or not.’

‘Sounds like fun,’ Fullalove said.

Chapter 37

Not everyone Plant had tried to talk to about Slater had responded. One message he had left now drew a reply. Barry Gordon phoned to say he’d been out of town but why didn’t they meet over lunch. It was all too late for Plant’s original enquiries. And Celia had made it clear that he was no longer on the case, there was no case. But now that Olivia had hired him, he was open to any further lead. Something might turn up. He decided to go ahead and meet.

Gordon suggested a Greek restaurant in Pitt Street. Diethnes. Steps led down from the footpath to a long basement room, white walls, white ceiling, dark wooden ceiling beams, dark wooden fittings, Greek motifs, columns, statues, football posters. It was like an earlier Sydney. Or an earlier Athens. Waiters in black trousers and white shirts. Tablecloths. The menu seemingly unchanged from the nineteen fifties when Greek restaurants were the regular venues of journalists, when there were morning papers and evening papers, days of hot metal and green eyeshades and long lunches. The waiter who greeted Plant knew Barry Gordon’s name, took him to the table where Gordon was already settled in, a carafe of retsina, bread, olive oil, an entree of fava, and an open newspaper.

‘Welcome to the time capsule,’ Gordon said. ‘James used to call it Plato’s cave. Alas, poor James.’

‘You knew him well?’

‘Over the years,’ Gordon said. ‘Hard to believe he’s gone. I shall miss him. Once a month or so we’d meet down here. Lament the decline of the world we knew.’

‘Which world was that?’

‘Print,’ he said. ‘Ink in the veins. He lived for it. Well, we all did. The smell of a new book fresh off the press. The joy of seeing your by-line. It’s like an addiction. It’s pathetic. What vanity! What a life of illusion! But that’s how it is. Tragic. And incurable. Nothing compares. Opening up the pages and seeing it there. And now ... “What pages?” you ask. Where are the weeklies of yesteryear? Where are the dailies, for that matter, shrunk and shrivelling. I never dreamed it would come to this. The new dark ages, James used to call them.’

‘People still read,’ Plant said, not so much argumentatively as trying for the positive.

‘Less and less,’ Gordon said. ‘It’s all snippets and gobbets now. Who reads a long, considered, analytical piece on a mobile phone? Who scrolls through a ten thousand word essay on-line? We got conditioned by the degradation of television. It set the agenda of the future. Think of the great political speeches of the ancient world. Demosthenes and all those other fellows, and compare them with the politicians’ sound bites of today.’

Plant nodded.

‘It used to keep us happy. Lamenting the end of everything. The death of print. The end of civilisation as we knew it. The decline of the west. Quite cheered us up.’

The waiter came up.

‘Grilled snapper, no chips, no salad, for you, sir,’ he said to Gordon. Gordon nodded.

‘And you, sir?’

Plant ordered vegetarian moussaka.

‘You want his salad?’ the waiter asked Plant.

‘Why not?’ Plant said.

‘Mind you,’ Gordon continued, ‘James had a good line in gloom. He was always the first to see the worst. Universal conspiracy theory, I used to call it. It gave him great joy. It was all light-hearted, not exactly a joke, but playful. Could this be true? How about this? Occupational hazard of the novelist. Cooking up plots. Fantasies. It was the novelists who popularised conspiracy theories. Invented many of them. A conspiracy theory is just a narrative interpretation, he used to say. But then he got the chance of a column in this weekly paper,

ceased publication now, ceased years ago, but it used to be lively. There were a couple of weeklies then that we all used to write for, me, Slater, Ted Kelly, Ghostly Sperrit, Angela Dark, Fullalove.'

Gordon shook his head slowly, reflectively, sadly. One of those 'those were the days' slow, sad shakes.

'Slater used to write these splendid pieces. Truly weird. If there was any chance of a plot he'd seize it. The Kennedy assassinations, the death of the Pope, Marilyn Monroe, Martin Luther King. Great stuff. The CIA running its own airlines. Drugs for arms. Funding the contras by flooding the Los Angeles ghettoes with crack. Spreading swine fever in the Dominican republic so it would cross the border into Cuba and ruin their pig farms. Trying to assassinate Castro with exploding cigars. Believe it or not. What if?

'Of course what happened was that he started to believe it all. Well, fair enough, a few years later most of what he wrote turned out to be true. That made him even more paranoid, of course. Now he saw plots everywhere. He'd pick them up off the footpath as he walked down the street. He should have stuck to fiction.'

Plant dipped his bread into the fava, got stuck into the retsina. Someone had draped the stone goddess beside their table with a string of pearls. They probably weren't pearls, and she was probably plaster rather than stone. She may not even have been a goddess, just a nymph or a nereid.

'In the end he probably talked himself out of a job. Any job. The thing about being freelance is you're not indispensible. By definition you're disposable. You sound too crazy too often, they stop giving you work. On the other hand, he could have been blacklisted. It happens. You offend someone. Management. Government. Security. Put them off their golf. That's it. "You'll never work in papers in this town again" sort of thing. Or movies. Or radio. Or anything. They don't even always say it explicitly. You just find doors aren't opening. Calls aren't returned.

'And there's less work around, anyway. Fewer publications. Massive redundancies on the ones that are left. So more and more people are looking for freelance work as they get sacked. He didn't want to go back to teaching. His novels weren't making enough for him to live on, nowhere near. He needed freelance work. Or funding. And he wasn't getting it.

‘He could be a pain, of course. Couldn’t help himself. Couldn’t shut up. Someone probably shafted him. Can’t say for sure. Not the sort of thing you can ever say for sure. But he probably upset someone. Envy. Jealousy. Maybe one of his literary cronies took a set against him, decided to try and reduce the competition, get him knocked off the board. Someone he’d said a few home truths to, or knew too much about, or who saw him as a threat, a rival, who knows, all those inflated egos. It could have happened. So if it was someone who had a line through to whoever, special branch, secret service, you name it, all they’ve got to say is that James is shooting his mouth off, dangerous subversive, don’t want him putting that sort of stuff in print. Just label him a commo or a loony or a fanatic. Way back when there were all these weird groups – Red Brigades, Angry Brigades, Weathermen, Baader-Meinhof – James always reckoned they were run by the secret services. He could’ve been right. Anyway, they attracted sympathisers and imitators. Usually from the disaffected intelligentsia – writers, students, professors. Ulrike Meinhof was a journalist. So our unknown friend on the scene makes a call, says, “Slater, he’s a fanatic, he’s the sort of dangerous type who would’ve joined the Weather Underground if it existed here.” So that gets him put on a list. And of course, once you’re on that sort of list you’re off the other lists, the ones you’ve got to be on to get celebrity and money and the Order of Australia. The ones you need to be on to get grants or prizes or film offers. So you’re out in the cold. That could’ve happened, no doubt about it. Could’ve. I’m not saying it did.’

‘Is that what he felt?’ Plant asked.

‘It drove him mad. Well, in a manner of speaking. Made him angry. He was sure he was being blocked all the way along.’

‘Did he have any idea who dobbed him in?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gordon said. ‘I don’t know that anyone did. It’s pure speculation.’

Plant wasn’t sure that he believed him that he didn’t know, or at least suspect, but he let it go. It was better to let Gordon talk rather than interrogate him. And he was happy to talk. Missing his lunches with Slater, maybe, something else no longer there.

‘How political was he?’ Plant asked.

‘He wasn’t much of a joiner. He was political in the sense he had political ideas. Beliefs. Strong ones. But he never joined any party. Not that I knew of. It’s not like he joined the Communist party. Or went on marches and demonstrations. He didn’t like being out there on the

front line. Said it reminded him too much of school games. He wasn't high profile. His writing could be pretty full on. His novels. But let's face it, it's hard to believe our spooks spend their time reading novels, isn't it? Especially literary fiction. So really, he wouldn't have been high priority on any normal monitoring of the scene. So someone probably named names and he was one they named. George Orwell did that. 1949. Sent the Foreign Office a list of thirty-eight left wing writers he told them they ought to keep their eye on. "Crypto-communists and fellow travellers" as he called them. His fellow writers. That's one thing we agreed on, what a fraudulent reputation as a man of the left Orwell still has.

'That's the other evil of a secret police. They get used to pay off old scores and private feuds. Denunciations. People feed them the names of their enemies or their rivals. Someone who stole their parking space. Someone who stole their girl-friend. Boy-friend. Whatever. Every government is going to have a security service. Most of them have several. James accepted that. He wasn't a naive liberal. He wasn't a liberal at all, most of the time. But what annoyed him was the way the chattering classes pretended there wasn't a security service monitoring them and that human rights weren't being infringed on a daily basis. Here. And then what annoyed him was finding himself, well, take your pick, marginalised, maybe. Blacklisted sounds a bit extreme. Not the sort of thing that happens here. But it does. It happens everywhere.

'He still got published. He still wrote the odd bit for the occasional paper. Blacklists aren't absolute and total. But they're effective. He knew what was happening. Or thought he knew. As I said, you never do know the truth about these things. Only suspect. If you're smart, you leave it alone and say nothing.'

'And Slater wasn't smart.'

'For a smart guy he certainly did some dumb things,' Gordon said. 'But I think it was deliberate. He was testing the waters. He wanted to find out if there really was a repressive state apparatus in God's own country.'

'And was there?'

Gordon grinned.

'Look,' he said. 'The nineteen-thirties and the nineteen-fifties generated swarms of left-wing writers. Right? But not the nineteen-sixties and seventies. All that protest fizzled out. Never continued. Maybe it never had any real radical base. Anyway, there aren't any surviving schools

of seventies radical writers that I know of, though you might have thought there would be. Or there again, you might not.'

He held up the carafe. Empty.

'So either the sixties and seventies were a fraud. A feeble fizzer. Or there were potential radical writers. And they've been snuffed out.'

'Snuffed out?'

'Silenced. Bought off. Whatever.'

He looked around for their waiter.

'Maybe we should order another, don't you think?' he suggested, raising the empty carafe.

The waiter acknowledged him from across the room. Gordon waited until he had come over and filled their glasses before he continued.

'All that sixties and seventies ferment, baby-boom generation coming into adulthood, four times as many of them as the previous generation, all that radical upheaval – and then the movement was stamped out. Slater figured it was up to people like him to keep the tradition alive – maintain a thread of radicalism for the children of the baby-boomers. And then, critical mass achieved, the revolution! Fond hope! That's why the media keep on hammering the left. You'd think with the Soviet Union collapsed they'd give up. But no. They're concerned to stamp out every last vestige of progressive thought. And promote their own evil ideology.

'Look at the media,' he went on. 'Television, movies. Does movie violence encourage violent behaviour? Of course it does. Television, movies, comics, computer games. All of it does. They know it does. That's why there are no movies or television series about the successful overthrow of the ruling class. Because it would encourage the people to rise up. No television series from the point of view of the terrorist. Terrorists! The vanguard of the revolution, we used to call them.'

He looked round the restaurant, shaking his head slowly, sadly.

'Of course the media conditions behaviour. That's why it's so shitty. Greed and sex and violence. They're the only values promoted. And the left has lost it. It needs a new aesthetic. What passes for the left now is boring, annoying, offensive and unappealing. The left needs to find itself a new aesthetic. Something that promotes revolutionary change for the better, not to

define it any more narrowly. If we enjoyed socialist art, socialist adventure, socialist music, we'd be there. So why isn't it there?'

'Tell me,' Plant said.

'It all goes back to Slater's universal conspiracy theory. Such aesthetics may exist but they've been suppressed. Extirpated. Like motor cars that can run on water. Tyres that never wear out. If ever anyone comes up with anything good, they make sure it never happens. Nip it in the bud.'

'And that's what Slater believed?'

'Sure did.'

'And they nipped him in the bud?'

'Well,' Gordon said, 'hardly in the bud. But in final full flower, perhaps. Snipped him off.'

'You believe that?'

'Let's put it like this,' Gordon said. 'Slater would have believed it. And look where it got him.'

He poured another glass and held it to the light.

'The beaded bubble winking at the brim,' he said, affectionately. It seemed to cheer him up. 'You know, the great thing about a controlled society like ours is it absolves you from the need to read or watch or listen to any of the cultural production. It's all controlled, it's all crap. You don't need to bother with any of it. Books, movies, the lot. Leaves a lot more free time for drinking.'

Chapter 38

Plant accessed his emails. Sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he would spend the weekend in refusal and not look at them at all. It gave him a sense of strength, underlain with a lurking anxiety that something might be waiting there. If he were really strong he would refuse to access them on weekdays too. It was something else to aim for. An aspiration. In the meantime he dutifully checked them day after day. It was pathetic, he knew, another compulsion, another addiction, another dependency.

'The Great Game,' he read. 'In literature, life and art. A symposium in honour of Professor Toby Oates, AO, at the National Library of Australia.'

For a moment he thought he was being asked to contribute a paper. A scholarly discourse. He was both horrified and excited. Topics flittered across his consciousness. And then he read on more carefully and realised the programme had already been determined and he was being invited to be part of the admiring audience. Relief and annoyance battled it out. He was poised to press delete as he scrolled down the list of participants and their papers. But as a matter of principle he made himself read things he found distasteful. It was all information. From the random and intrusive, valuable data could nonetheless be gathered. Things that systematic study might never reveal.

And there it was. Amidst papers on 'Cromwell's Spymaster Thurloe' and 'Kipling's Legacy' and 'Cultural Freedom then and now' was 'Invisible Ink' by Celia Sebright. There was no doubt, but he checked it out nonetheless in the notes on participants. 'Celia Sebright is a performance artist and specialist in works on paper. She has exhibited widely in South East Asia, the USA and Australia.'

How had she become caught up in Uncle Toby's tentacles? Or was it the case that it was Uncle Toby who had been lured and entangled? Or were they both in it together, colleagues in arms, companions of dishonour?

He scrolled back to the beginning of the email and looked for the date. In a week's time. Was his invitation an afterthought? Prompted by his meeting Uncle Toby? Or Celia? Or was it just another inefficiently run and badly organised conference? Did they hope it was too late for him to be able to arrange his busy life and attend? Or was it an urgent afterthought and they wanted him there? Whoever they might be, the organisers. Was it their idea, whoever they were? Or Uncle Toby's? Or Celia's? And was that a factor in how he would decide whether or not to go?

He made a reservation at University House. He liked the suggestion of past times, an allusion to a remote collegiality, the quadrangle, the cloisters, the fish pond, the faded spines of the books in the library, evocative of an age when books and universities had an association.

He sat in the back of the lecture theatre and watched the participants. Academic literary critics and historians and political scientists. Novelists specializing in crime and spy fiction. Assorted

artists and filmmakers and intelligence professionals become academics, visiting, adjunct and on secondment. Specialists in counter-terrorists studies. He knew that's what they were, or at least what they claimed to be, from the notes on participants in the conference programme, but there was no obvious way of telling them apart. Maybe they were all intelligence professionals, masquerading as academics and novelists and filmmakers. Plant experienced a developing empathy with Slater's vision of it all. If it was indeed Slater's vision. Maybe it was just common sense. Or acute paranoia. Or all three.

He read through the programme again. Historians celebrating Walsingham and Burghley and Dr Dee and Sir Edward Kelly. Literary specialists making claims for Christopher Marlowe. Australianists not to be outdone making claims for Arthur Phillip and Mathew Flinders as super spies. A paper on LSD, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary and Tom Wolfe. It was something of a mishmash. What used to be called interdisciplinary. Plant wondered if discipline was still a word in academic usage. It had never been clear what discipline Toby Oates had emerged from. He seemed to know so many people in so many subjects, area studies, writing programmes, literature, history, culture and society. A fusion conference. A tribute to Uncle Toby with peer-reviewed papers so it could all be counted in the quest for advancement. Basically about policing and control, really, from people involved in running the show or wishing they were.

It was all a lot more gruesome than Plant remembered. The tedium of it. He had put in his time, back when he still had time to put in and expectations of its bearing fruit. He had sat through his share of seminar papers. They hadn't resulted in the physical impairment that putting in time at rock concerts had produced. Not deafness. But an equally disabling deadening of consciousness had taken effect. An appalling slow paralysis, erasing hope and excitement and enthusiasm and expectations. There was no way he could sit through a day of it. He left the first session as soon as the questions began. He hung out that long. It saved giving a public impression of rudeness to the speaker. Indeed it might be seen as a tribute, leaving before the irrelevant nit-picking and grandstanding, staying only for the paper, sufficient in itself. Well, maybe, or maybe not: whichever, he could stay no longer. He was out in the foyer consuming unnecessary coffee from the coffee pots stewing away there. He felt a wave of sympathy for Uncle Toby, having to sit beaming through the entire proceedings.

And then after lunch there was Celia on invisible inks. Plant made a point of hearing that. She had some interesting information. For centuries urine was preferred in continental

Europe, citrus in Britain. Which was odd given that England was not renowned for citrus production, but sure could produce a lot of piss. Laughter from the republicans. However, she added, in the early twentieth century British intelligence discovered that semen was a preferred medium of communication since it would not respond to iodine vapour. Their man in Copenhagen kept a supply of it in a bottle, but it tended to stink so he was instructed that a fresh operation was needed for each communication. She went on to outline invisible ink's potential for contemporary art production, words and images emerging as an artwork was exposed to heat, fading over time, embedded messages and images coming and going from the pages of books and works on paper. And you never knew if they had all revealed themselves or if there were more to come in the fullness of time or extreme conditions. That quaint old renaissance trust in art as a secure, enduring memorial now to be replaced by best contemporary practice: take a book and piss on it. Have a wank and apply for a grant, exactly the sort of project the Australia Council could enthusiastically support.

'So glad you could come,' she greeted him after the paper, as they both hung around the coffee pots rather than go back in for the next session. 'I told Uncle Toby to invite you, but you never know.'

He wondered how well she knew Uncle Toby. Calling him by his nickname might indicate some familiarity. Or maybe she'd just heard him called that.

No, Plant reflected, you never know.

Chapter 39

The celebratory dinner was marginally more tolerable. There were speakers, oh yes there were. All wearing their Order of Australia lapel pins, like defendants in a political corruption trial. But over dinner they aimed at the comic and anecdotal and a sort of brevity. As brief as academics could manage after a lifetime of holding forth to captive students. He chose the vegetarian option. Later he wondered if that might have been the cause of the problem. If indeed it was a problem. It was always a mistake to diverge from the ordinary. Asking for the vegetarian option on an aircraft or at a public dinner was to make it easy for them to slip some substance into it, it was flagged, the seat number specified. It you just stuck to the routine menu there was less

chance of being targeted. Possibly. Slater's world vision was contagious. Perhaps that was why they had got rid of him.

Or it could have been the joint Celia generously offered him, back in his room. A more likely suspect than the vegetarian option for inducing mental impairment. She waved away his offer to pass it back and share it. Instead she produced another one and lit it, so he stuck with the one she gave him. Which, for all his distaste for sharing phlegm and spittle, was careless, he realised on reflection, but the fact that he didn't think that at the time suggested he might already have been drugged, and the vegetarian option was the likeliest culprit. But that didn't mean the joint wasn't dodgy too. How could he not have suspected it? Greed, desire, desperation.

And who anyway was to say it was carelessness? To have revealed his suspicions would have been the obviously careless. Obvious to anyone observing. Sending back the vegetarian option. How could he have done that? Just not eaten it, whatever it was, something allegedly vegetable encased in filo pastry and garnished with rice and raw things. Or should he have refused the joint? That would have aroused her suspicions if nothing else did. Best to go along with the situation, accept the universe, get stoned and let her do her worst.

Plant awoke with that old familiar feeling of the utter unfamiliarity of everything, of not knowing where he was, how he'd got there, where he'd been or what he'd done. If anything. If only. He had no recollection of any of it. Not in any specifics, not in any detail. Just that deeply uneasy feeling about what might have happened, as he lay there awake in the no longer early morning, alone, and trying to remember.

In one sense it was no surprise. If it had happened. If it had happened or not, for that matter. There was a pervasive, predatory sexuality about her that he had responded to immediately. From the first sight of those bare breasts against the beauty of Pittwater. It had only been a matter of time. And opportunity. And means. And motive? he asked himself. Did it need a motive, other than sexuality? Though wasn't it a bit close to Slater's demise, on her part? Or maybe that made no difference. Maybe it would have occurred, whether Slater had died or not.

Or would it? If it did. Wasn't its very closeness an indicator of something else? That she wanted, if not information, which it might have been, some other outcome? Maybe to draw him to her so he wouldn't feel able to suspect her. Or at least, so that he would feel it would be rather bad form to accuse her. Thanks for the sex, now for that other matter, your pushing Slater over

the rails. Was she buying him off with favours in kind? Relying on some old time code of courtesy, like you can't accuse someone you're fucking of murder, in the way wives used to be exempted from testifying against their husbands.

And if it wasn't that, what was it? His irresistible appeal? His own pervasive, predatory sexuality? Plant did not suffer from low self-esteem. Not especially low. But he had a pretty shrewd sense of his own worth. Market value. Exchange value. Yes, she might have fancied him. Women had. In the past. Maybe they still would, in the future. But the bereaved Celia? Had she been so taken by him? Or had she simply plucked out the first available partner who might offer some further satisfaction after the success of her paper. Applause and then the rest. The felt life, as literary critics used to put it. Make a day of it. And night. Normative conference behaviour, whether academics or hedge fund traders or vacuum cleaner salesmen or diplomats.

Possibly, Plant reflected, not very convinced. Possibly it meant nothing. Or possibly it was her manoeuvre to keep him close and observant and unsuspecting, a manoeuvre that paradoxically provoked his inevitable suspicions, suspicions being something he held closer to his being than any sexual partner. Alas!

But had anything happened? He had no idea. He tried to remember. Did he remember her breasts, pressing against him? Did he remember her astride and above him? Did he remember burrowing into her or her going down on him? He felt himself growing erect again as he lay there. But had any of it happened? Were these real or phantom memories? A song without words. The dialogue, and surely there had been dialogue, had faded like invisible ink. And Celia with it. Maybe it had only been dialogue, maybe there had never been any action.

A pity about that, he reflected. Without a doubt it could have been enjoyable. Certainly the retrospective idea of it was. Pity he could remember so little of the detail. Pity that it might never have happened.

What had he revealed, in terms of thought and suspicions rather than flesh and appetite? And appreciation. He'd been appreciative, even as the suspicions had risen and he'd begun to wonder. What he had babbled about? Presumably the topic of Slater had been raised, unless they scrupulously hadn't mentioned him, avoiding the issue out of some sense of the proprieties. A bit soon for Celia to be spreading it around or for Plant to be taking advantage of her loss of a partner. Put like that it sounded rather iffy. Even worse: but iffy would do for now. So did they share suspicions of whether he'd been driven to kill himself from the stress of surveillance and

harassment, or whether some agent of the secret state had pushed him over the rail, and who might that be? Or did they put all that aside and just go for satisfying their carnal appetites? You tell me, he told himself, I have no fucking idea.

He should have checked her out from the beginning. Was this a classic male error? Assuming she was just the partner, the appendage, a person of no especial interest. Or was it his reluctance to use internet search engines. Even the ones that said they kept no records of your searches. He didn't need Slater or Fullalove to persuade him that internet usage was all monitored. NSA, GCHQ, CIA, SIS, ASIO, what did it matter, they all shared or traded or bought or stole each other's information. Someone was always watching and listening. Or likely to be. Temptingly easy as it was just to sit at your desk and look up something. And so dangerous. All those naive dissidents and idealists and utopians, young seedling Plants, looking up WikiLeaks and getting their names on an international watch list immediately. Or accidentally. Like the time he searched for information on pigskin, a piece of historical research assistance, and ended up on a fundamentalist Islamic website where someone was posing the problem of having found out that his horse saddle was pigskin and was the use of leather from an unclean animal something prohibited? Now Plant's name would pop up on the international register of potential jihadists.

He carried on wondering in the morning light, too late for breakfast, close to time to check out.

But all was not lost. The unconquerable will. It came to him in the usual flash. Those Eureka moments. Radio transmissions from outer space. The slow churning of the subconscious. Whatever the source, it came to him. The *Who's Who of Australian Women*.

He had a shower, packed, checked out, and then went into the University House library. He had it to himself, not a soul there. It was like a past world, books and silence.

Of course she was listed. How could a career woman, an artist, a performer, not be? Validation. Acceptance. Acclaim. Before everyone did it for themselves on Wikipedia and Facebook. Celia Sebright. Performance artist, mail art, assemblage, works on paper. Whether it was all there, Plant did not know. And if not all, and it wouldn't be all, there was a lot there. At least enough of it. BA Sydney University. MA Yale. Subjects not specified. Asia-link fellowship. Australia Council fellowship. Fulbright Fellowship. Residencies. Exhibitions. Touring exhibitions. Festivals. Curatorships. All through what used to be called Australasia, with the odd

trip to the USA, South-East Asia and Europe. Funded by various foundations and councils in themselves funded by Foreign Affairs. The Department of.

Maybe most of Celia's funding had been before she knew Slater. But after they had met, how did she get to stay on the circuit when she was living with someone allegedly blacklisted?

He wondered what Slater had made of it all. Was that why he'd gone on about people revealing things in *Who's Who*? Had that been something he'd been pointing Plant towards, without spelling it out? Had he suspected what was going to happen to him?

Driving back from Canberra, Plant reflected on the night before. Had he had a good time, so good that he couldn't remember anything about it? Or had she simply fed him a joint laced with something or other and hacked into his word horde, rifled through his thoughts such as they were and accessed the current state of his investigations. Not that it would have done her any good. Not, that is, in revealing what he knew since until now he hadn't really known anything. But now he did. That she was concerned to know what he knew told him what he needed to know, if indeed she was concerned. Gradually he realized that his total lack of knowledge of what had or might have happened the night before was knowledge in itself. It had to have been some state of the art truth drug or date rape aid to induce such total amnesia. It must have been Celia's strategy to find out what he knew. The reality was he knew practically nothing. Slater's paranoia, he knew more than enough about that, more than he wanted. As to how Slater died, he hadn't had a clue.

Except that now he realized that maybe he did. Whether or not they'd had sex remained unclear. And of much less interest to him than the fact, if it was the fact, that Celia had felt the need to drug him with something or other. And that was surely the clue. It put her firmly in the frame.

Chapter 40

There was a message on Fullalove's answer phone when Plant returned from Canberra.

'We've got Fullalove. If you want him back, pick up the phone.'

Followed by a bit of white noise and then 'Thank you for your call.'

And that was it. No number to call, obviously, or presumably, to avoid a trace. Just a moral or practical dilemma as to whether he could be said to want Fullalove. What is the definition of a friend? Someone who will buy back your liberty, pay the ransom. Anyway, no figure had been named so Plant was free of moral anxiety. Comparatively. But curious. Who would want Fullalove? And why would they think he cared? And what could he do about it, anyway? Except wait.

In due course the phone rang again. Plant picked up. The same message.

'What do you mean, you've got Fullalove? Why would I want him?'

'We have him in custody.'

'Are you the police?'

'Not precisely.'

'So what do you mean in custody? What sort of custody?'

'Physical restraint. Blindfold. Gag.'

'For Heaven's sake! Why?'

'We thought you might be able to shed some light on that.'

The voice was familiar to Plant. Sort of mockney. Show business cockney. Like a British crime show on television.

'I don't know what he's been doing. I'm not his keeper. I'm not his brother.'

'Why would you be his brother?'

'I'm not. It's just a saying.'

'A saying?'

'A figure of speech. The Bible. Listen, what are you on about?'

'If you want Fullalove ...'

'I'm not sure that I do.'

The voice went on regardless.

'... this is what you have to do.'

'Whether I want him or not.'

There was a silence, a delay as if the speaker were consulting. Maybe just with himself.

''Sright'

Herring. Not a doubt about it. It was Herring's voice.

'Why have you got him?' Plant asked. 'What did he do? Allegedly.'

‘No fucking allegedly about it, squire. He was caught red fucking handed. Stalking.’

‘Stalking? Fullalove!’

‘You better believe it.’

‘I don’t. It’s not his thing.’

‘Your choice. Meanwhile he sits bound to the kitchen chair ...’

‘Why the kitchen chair?’

‘What difference does it make what chair it is?’

‘Probably none, come to think of it.’

‘So if you want to see him again ...’

‘Tell me what I have to do,’ Plant said. No point in causing gratuitous annoyance. Keep the witty responses for later, if at all.

‘Church Point Spares,’ Herring said.

‘Church Point Spares?’

‘The car park. That’s what they used to call it. People always getting bits of their cars knocked off. By the ferry wharf for Scotland Island.’

‘And this is where you’re trading in Fullalove.’

‘No, mate, this is where you turn up. And if you’re clean and haven’t told the cops, then we take it from there.’

Chapter 41

It looked like being a long evening. Plant drove out to Pittwater and waited in the car park. Herring drove up in his ute and instructed Plant to follow. At least it was Herring’s own ute. So presumably nothing too terrible had happened or was going to happen. Nothing that required car theft and concealment and anonymity.

Plant followed the ute down to Mona Vale and up Barrenjoey Road. Newport, Avalon, Whale Beach, Palm Beach. They stopped at a house on the ocean side, perched sheer on the cliff. As soon as he got out of his car Plant could hear the noise of the surf pounding on the rocks below. Herring stood there, locking the ute, a cricket bat in hand. Plant looked at it apprehensively.

‘Just in case,’ Herring said.

Inside the house a huge picture window opened onto the ocean. It was pitch black, like the sky. Fullalove sat tied to a kitchen chair in the middle of the room.

‘How did you ...?’

‘Grab him?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Years of practice. Being a roadie. Tour manager. There’s always security issues. So ...’ He swung the bat as he stood there, idly.

‘Just part of the job.’

‘Did the SAS course, didn’t I?’

‘Did you?’

Herring laughed.

Fullalove made grunting noises.

‘What’s he been doing?’ Plant asked.

‘Suspicious behaviour.’

‘Like what?’

‘Suspicion of intent to break and enter.’

‘And did he?’

‘What, break and enter? No, we nobbled him first. But we’ve got him for stalking.’

‘Stalking who?’

‘Me,’ Olivia said, appearing through a doorway, all floral patterns and flushed complexion.

Plant shook his head. The more in sorrow than in anger shake.

‘You want me to take him away?’

‘We want you to explain what’s going on,’ Olivia said.

‘That should be easy enough,’ Plant said.

‘Easy! What do you mean, easy? I said I’d hire you to find out who killed James and you go and set your filthy little offsider to follow me. I’m furious.’

‘Not me,’ Plant said.

‘What do you mean, not you?’

‘Not I,’ he tried again, in case that was easier to understand. ‘I didn’t set him onto you. Why would I?’

‘You tell me.’

‘I didn’t. I’m not responsible for Fullalove’s actions. Absolutely not.’

‘So why’s he been following me?’

‘Maybe he fancies you,’ Herring said. ‘Some sort of pervert.’

Olivia glared.

‘Are you implying only some pervert would fancy me?’

‘No, no,’ Herring said.

‘No, not at all,’ Plant agreed.

Fullalove made incomprehensible grunting sounds.

‘Well, that’s cleared that up,’ Plant said.

‘It certainly hasn’t,’ Olivia said.

‘No,’ agreed Herring.

‘I don’t know what he’s been doing,’ Plant said. ‘Why don’t you ask him?’

‘We’re asking you. You live in the same house.’

‘I’m only visiting.’

‘You still live there. How can you not know what he’s doing?’

‘I’ve been away.’

‘Convenient.’

‘Canberra.’

No one spoke.

‘Take his gag off and ask him,’ Plant suggested.

Olivia and Herring looked at each other.

‘It took bloody ages to tie him down and shut him up,’ Herring said.

‘Well, leave him tied up and let him speak.’

Fullalove made more grunting noises. More of protest than agreement, it sounded, though it was hard to tell.

‘He won’t shut up,’ Herring said.

‘It always was his problem,’ Plant agreed. ‘You could leave him gagged and untie one hand and give him a pen and pencil.’

‘Then he’d untie himself.’

‘Not if you strap him down more firmly.’

Fullalove tried to say something undoubtedly obscene or offensive. Or both.

‘I can see what you mean,’ Plant said.

‘He was prowling round outside,’ Olivia said. ‘But all day I had this sense that someone was watching me. And following me.’

‘Since when?’

‘All day.’

‘Really,’ Plant said, in lieu of anything else to say.

‘You swear you didn’t put him onto me?’

‘No. Absolutely not.’

‘Not even for protection?’

‘Protection?’

‘Isn’t that what private detectives do in murder case. Protect people who might be in danger.’

Plant signalled incomprehension. An abstracted head shake.

‘So why was he following me if you didn’t put him onto me?’

‘I’ve no idea. Why not ask him?’

Fullalove made a buzzing sound through his gag. Like folk singers used to do with mouth organs.

‘I think he’d cooperate.’

‘He already did,’ Herring said. ‘He said to call you. You’d explain.’

‘Explain what?’

‘Everything, he said.’

‘Everything?’

‘Yes. Why you sent him here, for a start.’

‘I didn’t send him.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well someone’s lying,’ Herring said.

‘Nothing to do with me,’ Plant said. ‘Why would I send him?’

‘That’s what we’re asking you.’

‘Well, sorry, I can’t help.’

They sat there in silence, looking at each other and the black void of the ocean and sky.

‘Are you telling the truth?’ Olivia asked.

As if an innocent question like that would get an honest answer. Plant found her straightforwardness and naivety touching. If indeed she were straightforward and naive.

‘Of course,’ he said.

‘You didn’t send him?’

‘No.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Nothing to do with me.’

‘He said you did.’

‘He was lying.’

‘Does he lie?’

‘All the time,’ Plant said.

Fullalove buzzed loudly, whether in agreement or denial it was impossible to tell.

‘Why?’

‘Institutional practice.’

‘Does that mean you lie all the time too?’

Plant smiled.

‘Good one,’ he said. ‘But no. I don’t lie.’

‘I wish I could believe you.’

‘You can believe me.’

‘I wouldn’t,’ Herring said.

‘Really,’ Plant said, at his most persuasive. The best he could do. ‘It’s nothing to do with me. He’s acting on his own in this.’

They looked at Fullalove bound and gagged there, a sorry sight.

Chapter 42

‘So where do you get into the act?’ Plant asked Herring.

‘He was stalking her.’

‘Really?’

‘Prowling around.’

‘So you tied him up and gagged him.’

‘He was being obstreperous.’

‘Obstreperous.’

‘You know,’ Herring said.

‘I’m not sure I do.’

‘Vituperative and abusive.’

‘I see.’

‘Blasphemous.’

‘Racist? Homophobic?’ Plant asked.

‘Yes, them too.’

‘Climate change denier?’

‘You got it,’ Herring said.

Olivia glared at Fullalove.

‘I still don’t quite see it,’ Plant said. ‘Why he’s bound and gagged. What exactly you have in mind.’

‘More to the point,’ Olivia said, ‘is what you had in mind.’

‘Me?’ Plant said.

‘You still haven’t explained why he was stalking me.’

‘I have no idea.’ He wondered whether to assure her it wasn’t because Fullalove fancied her, but decided better not.

‘You think I killed James.’

‘No,’ Plant said. He held back on adding ‘not really’. Was he sure, anyway? With Fullalove tied up like that, anything was possible.

‘So who did?’

‘I’m working on it.’

‘Do you have a clue?’

‘A clue?’

‘Do you have any idea at all?’

‘Too early to say.’

‘He’s been dead for ages.’

Plant nodded.

They sat round the kitchen table. Olivia made a pot of tea. It was all very cosy, quite unlike a kidnapping and hostage situation, except for Fullalove sitting there, bound and gagged.

‘I’ll take him away if you want,’ Plant offered.

‘How do I know he won’t come back?’ Olivia asked.

‘Maybe we should give him a bit of discouragement,’ Herring suggested. ‘Break a leg, or something.’ He still had the cricket bat beside him. He didn’t look like a cricketer, all in black. It made the bat seem more menacing than it might have been.

‘I guess you could,’ Plant agreed.

They hadn’t bound Fullalove’s ears, so he could hear everything that was said. It was too good an opportunity to miss.

‘We could try water-boarding and see what he tells us,’ Herring said.

Plant nodded.

‘I know it was that bitch Celia killed James,’ Olivia said.

Plant nodded again.

‘Not impossible,’ he agreed.

‘Not impossible,’ Olivia repeated. Scornfully. ‘How useless is that?’ she said.

‘There’s no proof,’ Plant said.

‘So find some.’

‘If only it was that easy,’ Plant said. ‘I might need Fullalove back.’

They looked at him, bound and gagged beside the kitchen table. Steam rose from the cups of tea. Herring produced a packet of chocolate digestive biscuits from a cupboard. It was all very cosy, except for Fullalove.

‘Oh, why not?’ Herring said. ‘You can have him.’

‘Just leave the gag on till you get him in the car,’ Olivia said.

‘Fair enough,’ Plant said.

‘I’d leave it on till you get him home,’ Herring suggested.

‘Good point,’ Plant said.

Fullalove did more of the mouth organ voice. It sounded like expressions of rage and frustration. Not an encouragement to remove the gag.

Chapter 43

'I was keeping tabs on her, that's all,' Fullalove said. 'For you, mate. She said she'd give you a call and she never did. You'd gone all gooey-eyed and lovey-dovey. I wasn't convinced. Still not. So I just kept tabs on her to see where she went.'

'And where did she go?'

'To that place at Palm Beach where Herring was hanging out.'

'Fair enough.'

'Possibly,' Fullalove said. 'But you need to make sure.'

'How did you find her?'

'I found him. Through his old band contacts. He was staying with them.'

'So what did you find out?'

'Didn't find out anything.'

It had the ring of truth.

'I thought you might like to know if she was giving him one.'

'Who?'

'Olivia. Herring.'

'Why would I like to know that?'

'Jealousy. Possessiveness. Fantasy.'

'So was she?'

'Hard to tell.'

'What do you mean, hard to tell? You mean you don't have any evidence at all.'

'Something like that. Sorry, mate. I did my best.'

'Best?'

'Just trying to help.'

'None of your business.'

'What friends are for,' Fullalove said.

‘What?’

‘Putting their life on the line. Getting kidnapped. Assaulted. There’s not many would do that.’

‘I should never have untied you,’ Plant said.

‘Took you long enough.’

There was that, Plant reflected with some satisfaction.

‘So what do you reckon?’

‘What do I reckon?’ Fullalove asked. ‘About what?’

‘Did they do it?’

‘Who?’

‘Olivia and Herring.’

‘Do what?’

‘Kill Slater.’

‘How would I know?’

‘You said you were checking them out.’

‘Ah well,’ Fullalove said, ‘you disowned me.’

‘Disowned you?’

‘Said I was nothing to do with you.’

‘So!’

‘So it’s none of your business, is it, what I found out? You already assured Olivia of that. Wouldn’t want to be caught out lying, would you?’

‘Knock it off,’ Plant said.

‘Knock it off! I’m the one who was strapped to a chair and gagged and threatened in life and limb while you denied all knowledge of me and the cock crowed three times.’

‘There wasn’t any cock crowing.’

‘There’s always cockerels crowing somewhere in the world.’

‘Sad old world,’ Plant said.

‘Sure is,’ Fullalove agreed with feeling, rubbing his wrists to restore feeling where he’d lost it through being tied up.

‘You reckon they were involved?’

‘Why ask me?’ Fullalove asked.

‘I had to disown you.’

‘Institutional practice.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Fullalove said. ‘You want to know what I think?’

‘Please.’

‘I’ve no bloody idea.’

‘Oh.’

‘But I wouldn’t bloody well put it past them.’

‘Well, that’s interesting in itself,’ Plant said.

‘You look around at the world,’ Fullalove said, ‘and it gets so that there are some things you’d really prefer not to know the truth about. Just for your own sanity and peace of mind. And this whole business with Slater is one of those things. Best left alone.’

Chapter 44

But Plant still wanted to know, despite what seemed like a strategic withdrawal on Fullalove’s part. He phoned Celia. He had been thinking of ways to confront her, and nothing had sprung to mind. He could go out to the island again and demand the truth. Though in Plant’s experience, truth had not always presented itself on demand. He had to find a way of letting her know he knew everything, when in fact he didn’t. He knew a bit and suspected a lot and he wanted her spontaneously and unreservedly to confirm his suspicions. And was that ever going to happen? The phone call might have provided an opportunity to press her with questions, but she cut him short. She was busy right now.

‘Come out to the island,’ she instructed. It was a summons.

‘Sure,’ Plant said, the ever agreeable. ‘When?’

‘How about next week,’ she said. ‘Like today week. Monday. After the weekend. Get here midday. Take the twelve-thirty ferry. We can have a spot of lunch.’

It seemed a fair way ahead. He had been planning on calling in on her earlier than that. Thinking of it, anyway. But at the offer of a firm date, he agreed. It seemed the easiest thing to do.

Easiest for Celia. It held him off for a week. He had the sense that he had been manipulated yet again, outmanoeuvred. But since he had no clear plan of his own, perhaps it was the best way. The only one, anyway.

'She's playing you, Plant,' Fullalove assured him. 'With the promise of sexual favours. And she knows there's not much you can do to investigate anyway. You can't get any of the forensics. All you can do is ask where she was on the night of whenever it was. And anyone else who might have been there. Start with her. And she'll schmooze her way out of that one, won't she? She's bought you, Plant. And you're going to love every minute of it. So why not?'

Rather than wait for the ferry, Plant took the water taxi to Olivia's jetty. A bright new red and yellow sign had been erected at the bottom of the cliff. FOR SALE. A row of half a dozen Balinese or Thai or whatever they were streamers at the end of the jetty flapped in the wind blowing down the length of Pittwater. A celebration of Slater's death, primary colours rather than the sombre black of traditional mourning, or an art installation?

Plant got into the inclinator and juddered up, past the blood-red bougainvillea, and out onto the deck. Celia was sitting there with Olivia.

He had a sudden flash of fear, that they were both in this together, that between them they had pitched Slater off the deck and were now sitting there carving up the assets. He wondered how he could not have seen it before.

'Plant!' Celia said, in her usual honey-trap tones.

'Plant!' Olivia said, and they could have been tones of innocent, enthusiastic delight. And surprise.

'Let me get you a drink,' Celia said, all smiles.

She went inside.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' Plant said.

'Nor me,' Olivia said. 'Expect to see you, that is.'

'What's going on?'

'She called to say she wanted to say goodbye. No hard feelings and all that.'

'Say goodbye?'

'I'm going,' Celia said, handing Plant a glass of white wine. 'This'll fix you up.'

‘Going?’ Plant said, taking it. Disposable plastic.

‘There’s nothing to keep me here,’ she said. ‘The police are satisfied.’

‘Satisfied?’ Plant said.

‘That James’s death was an accident.’

‘Satisfied,’ he said again. He couldn’t help a note of doubt.

‘Even if you’re not.’

‘Me?’

‘Both of you.’

‘Well ...’

‘You believe James’s fantasies that I was some sort of agent sent to destroy ...’

‘Well ...’

‘Well indeed. How do you know I’m not? And you never will know, will you? Haunted by doubt for the rest of your lives.’

She laughed.

‘Did you tell the police of James’s suspicions?’ Plant asked.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know.’

‘Yes,’ Plant said.

She smiled some more.

‘So where are you going?’

‘Away.’

‘That’s what she said to me,’ Olivia said, drink beside her on the deck.

‘So what about this place?’

‘On the market,’ Celia said.

‘You going far?’ Plant asked.

‘Who knows?’

‘That’s what she said to me,’ Olivia said.

‘You’re repeating yourself, darling,’ Celia said. ‘Have another smoke and relax.’

She handed a joint each across to Olivia and Plant.

‘Widow’s weed,’ she said, lighting up both with a smile.

It was at this point that Plant knew that he was making a big mistake, even as he inhaled, Celia beaming at them both.

Plant awoke to a loud roaring sound, mechanical, throbbing, reverberating. It took him some time to separate it from the throbbing inside his head, and having done that it took him a while to open his eyes. The afternoon sun glared into them and it took a while to focus. It hurt. Everything hurt. His body felt burnt and inflamed. He looked at it. It seemed to be an unhealthy bright red, and unclothed. Little red bite marks covered his legs and stomach and arms, some of them puffed up into extensive weals. He moved his head painfully. He was lying naked on a plastic reclining chair out on the deck. Olivia was lying on another one beside him. Naked likewise. The colour of a cruelly boiled lobster. No sign of clothes. Nothing obviously thrown aside in the height or depth of passion. Nothing to indicate why they were lying there naked.

The noise will still there, but had dropped down to a quieter level. Plant looked out over Pittwater to where it seemed to be coming from. The same half dozen boats were still moored out in the water, as if they had never moved except to swing round with the tide and wind. Celia stood at the end of the jetty, a couple of matching suitcases beside her, dressed in her professional conference presentation trouser suit. And hat. Like a day at the races. Very visual. Waving an arm beneath the waving Balinese streamers, a practical application of attention grabbing performance art, performative art, signalling look at me, look at my attention seeking banners, as the seaplane, propeller spinning, motor throbbing, gently taxied its way towards the jetty and tied up. Celia put her baggage aboard, and then turned back to look at the house. She waved and blew a kiss, a farewell acknowledgement to her audience. Plant made no attempt to wave back.

And then the pilot helped her aboard, untied the mooring rope, and closed the cabin door. The motor roared, the seaplane pulled away from the jetty and taxied out for take off. It headed along a length of Pittwater and turned round, waited there poised, the engine revolutions rising, and then it roared along the water in front of them and took off, into the sunset. Nice touch, Plant reflected. He sat there listening to its low throaty throbbing as it swung round above the island and out of sight. She could be heading for anywhere, land or water. It was amphibious. He knew because he'd checked it out after the first time he'd seen it. That adolescent fascination with aircraft that he'd never lost. Like that adolescent fascination with sex.

As the sound of the engine faded away, a hideous raucous screeching burst out from the trees behind them, like some archaic cry from a prehistoric lost world.

‘What on earth was that?’ Plant asked.

‘Just a prawn bird,’ Olivia said, a nature girl who knew her birds. ‘Also known as a koel.’

‘It sounded like something was being murdered.’

‘Just the mating cry of the male,’ Olivia assured him.

Chapter 45

Plant looked round the deck for his clothes. They were not anywhere to be found. Nor Olivia’s. Why were they naked anyway? He had no idea, no recollection. Was it something he could ask Olivia, why are we like this? Or would that seem too casual, too macho, too bland a lack of remembrance of something touching and meaningful? Not that he remembered anything touching or meaningful. Or anything at all. One of those memory erasing drugs that had been in development over the years. He needed to be much more suspicious when people offered him drink and drugs. Had Celia drugged them and stripped them? Or had they stripped off themselves in the height of passion and thrown their clothes to the winds? Had the eagle spirited them away? Or had Celia put them in the wood-burning slow-combustion stove and incinerated them?

He turned from the deck and went into the house. It was not only their clothes that were missing. The whole house had been stripped bare. No curtains. No bed-clothes, just the bed-frames and mattresses. Empty wardrobes, empty chests of drawers, empty cupboards, empty, defrosted fridge, no light, no food. The power was off. The landline was dead. He realised they were stuck. No clothes, no money, no phone, no way of leaving, no way of calling for help. Very professional.

He went back onto the deck.

‘We’ve got a problem.’

As problems went, it wasn’t the worst. Nor the most unpleasant. On other occasions he might have enjoyed the thought of sitting naked in the setting sun with Olivia naked beside him. Undeniably attractive. Slim, trim, nubile and all that. He felt himself getting aroused as he thought about her, not even looking at her. These were hardly the circumstances in which to think erotic thoughts. But the thoughts thought themselves, they rose up unsummoned,

spontaneously, pressing against the unerotic realisation that they were trapped, stuck, and the temperature was dropping. Was this what they used to call Shanghaied?

'I've no idea,' she said, 'and I really don't think this is the time to go on about the meaning of words.'

'The meaning of life, then,' Plant suggested.

'We've got to get out of here,' she said, 'and you're still stoned.'

'I guess I am,' Plant acknowledged.

'We've got to stop her.'

'No chance of that, she's well away by now.'

'She killed James.'

'We can't prove it.'

'You know she did. She as good as admitted it.'

'Did she?'

'Don't you remember?'

'Remember what?'

'What she told us.'

'No recollection at all,' Plant said.

'She as good as said she was working for the security services. Slater always suspected her.'

'So why did he stay with her?'

'He thought it was just his paranoia.'

'So he was right. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean you're paranoid.'

'She'll get away with it.'

'Probably,' Plant agreed.

'Why?'

'No one will want to tangle with her if she claims she was doing a job.'

'Maybe she was,' Olivia said. 'I can believe it.'

'Who knows? Whether she was or not, no one is going to want to open that can of worms. She'll say Slater was writing this book exposing secret service drug projects and she had to stop him. Or she'll say she can't say anything, intelligence professional, my lips are sealed, it's all classified, which will be as good as saying she was just following orders. At the worst

she'll be seen as an over zealous agent rather than a calculating murderess who's bumped off Slater for his property. If, that is, she ever was an agent, and who's ever going to know whether she was or not?'

'You're saying she'll get away with it?'

'The way of the world,' Plant said. 'She'll just maintain he was stoned and he fell and it was an accident'

Plant tried to keep his mind on it all. The intricacies of surveillance and betrayal and murder. The secret state revealed. But it was the secret garden that he kept returning to. Perfumed garden. Whatever. Like one of those post-Marxist cultural theorists, recoiling from the public and political and economic and focussing on the body, the gaze. For the first time he felt they had a point. Even if it arose from a drug induced erasure of the political. Whatever the causes and origins, he found it was preoccupying him. The body. Olivia's body. As they sat out on the deck, naked, inflamed with sunburn or desire. He found it impossible to fix her in the eye, his own gaze drawing away from her and slipping down over her breasts and towards the more concealed area of her anatomy.

'Don't you remember what she said?' Olivia persisted. 'That James was taking too long to die. She was sick of waiting.'

'No,' Plant said.

'You must. She said, "Fuck fifty per cent. I want it all and now."'

'What does that mean?'

'Sounds like rather than divorcing him for half his property she decided to kill him for the lot.'

'Makes sense,' Plant said. 'Maybe she was just lying about doing a job.'

He couldn't remember anything. Sitting out on the deck. With a smoke and a drink. And then sitting out on the deck with nothing but the noise of the seaplane. But in between?

'She called him a faithless old fart,' Olivia said. 'But he loved me.'

'Maybe that's why she called him faithless.'

Olivia scowled. Plant checked himself, too late. Had Celia slipped him a truth drug as well as a memory eraser? Were they operational or was she testing them on him? He asked Olivia what she thought. She swore at him, most unhippyladylike. He wondered. It was still not

inconceivable that Olivia was in it together with Celia. Nothing seemed inconceivable. Why should he believe her? As Sherlock Holmes once put it, ‘Life is infinitely stranger than anything the mind of man could invent.’ He quoted it to Olivia. She was unimpressed.

‘Plant,’ she said, ‘you’re still off your face. Stop rambling. You’ve got to straighten out. We’ve got to get out of here.’

He smiled amiably.

‘I don’t see why.’

He tried to keep his eyes from roaming, but they were inevitably drawn to her. And no less inevitably what the eyes saw, the body desired. He could feel the stirrings.

‘Can’t you keep that thing under control?’ she said. ‘You’ll get it snapped up.’

‘Mmm,’ he said, as noncommittally yet as invitingly as he could manage.

‘And not by me,’ she assured him.

She pointed upwards. There it was, gazing down from the thermals, the eagle.

‘You wouldn’t want that eagle up there to think it was some sort of jumping fish, would you?’

His hands dropped down to cover his genitals quick as a leaping mullet. He was amazed at how rapid his unthought conditioned reflexes were. Relieved, too.

She laughed.

‘Come down to the jetty and have a dip.’

‘A dip?’

‘Come on, it’ll cool you off. Clear your head. You’ll be safe. I’ll hold your hand.’

‘My hand?’

‘Just do it,’ she said.

He might have tried resisting. But the sight of the eagle circling around up in the dome of the sky made him feel hugely vulnerable. The sudden descent. That sharp beak. His unprotected nakedness. Yet would he be any more protected under water? Didn’t eagles catch fish from beneath the surface? Would he be any safer as a fully immersed non-leaping mullet?

She dragged him across the deck and into the inclinator, pressed the down button, and they stood there pressed against each other, naked, the inclinator juddering its way down. Plant rather enjoyed it. But he couldn’t let the questions go, he couldn’t help himself.

‘How do I know this isn’t all some sort of performance and you’re not in cahoots with her?’ he asked. ‘You were both down here when he died.’

‘Are you off your brain?’

‘I don’t know. Am I?’

‘Well,’ she said, her hand on the back of his neck as they stood at the end of the jetty, little fishes milling around in the water below them, ‘say something like that once more and I’ll drown you.’

‘Are you serious?’ he asked.

‘About what?’

‘About drowning me.’

‘That’s something you may never know,’ she said. ‘Let’s just hope you never need to find out.’

She gave a push and he was in the water.

‘Hey!’ he protested, before a mouthful of sea-water silenced him.

She leapt in after him, and when he surfaced she pushed him under again. He came back up, spluttering. He scrambled for the jetty, hauled himself out, shivering. The chill afternoon wind swept along Pittwater. He looked round for some protection from it. Nothing except a couple of black wheelie bins. He decided to investigate before leaning up against them. He did not want to breathe in a lungful of mouldy food, rotting vegetation, dog shit. He walked over to them and opened the lid of the first one. It was empty, just the odour of stale wine. Inside the second was a dark green garbage bag. He untied the yellow ties cautiously. Maybe there would be an old towel or something, something to dry off with, something to wrap round to keep off the chill breeze coming off the water. Ever hopeful. On the other hand there might be something hideous inside, body parts, shredded manuscripts. Ever fearful. He held his head back as he opened the bag in case it turned out to be something awful. But it wasn’t. Just three plastic glasses and an empty bottle of West Australian white burgundy and beneath them some old clothes. He looked more carefully. His old clothes. And Olivia’s. She came up behind him before he could run off with the bag and leave her down there.

‘Yippee!’ she said. ‘We’re free. We can go.’

‘We could if you hadn’t gone and pushed me in the water. I’m soaking wet.’

‘Oh, don’t be a misery,’ she said. ‘We’ll get dry.’

‘How? There aren’t any towels or anything.’

‘Curtains, then.’

‘There aren’t any. The house is all wooden blinds.’

‘No problem. We’ll use natural means.’

‘Like starting a fire? Without any matches? Go on, then,’ he said.

The sort of thing she would inevitably know, or claim to know. Indigenous peoples. Girl Guides. Green energy.

‘Friction,’ she said.

‘What, rubbing the wooden blinds together?’

‘No, Plant, not the wooden blinds. Get imaginative. We can just rub ourselves against each other.’

His eyes lit up. And the rest of him.

‘And catch fire?’ he asked.

‘Is that what you want?’ she asked.

‘Might warm us up a bit, why not?’ Plant said, ever hopeful, optimistic again. The positive ending. ‘Seems like a good idea to me.’

Cover Story

To Nigel Roberts

Chapter 1

‘Somebody’s trying to burn me down,’ Turner said.

Plant looked at the charred and water-sodden boxes of books against the wall.

‘Either you or the books,’ Plant agreed.

They stood on the ground floor of Paige Turner Publishing Pty Ltd. The office itself was on the floor above, up a metal staircase in the corner. The ground floor was a parking space with boxes of books lined up against the walls; or a warehouse with room for parking. A Range Rover was parked on one side. Near the entrance a dozen or so boxes were blackened and partially burned.

‘If the sprinkler system hadn’t worked the whole place could have gone up in flames,’ Turner said. ‘Amazing, really. That it actually worked.’

Was there a shadow of regret there, that it had worked? Wouldn’t there have been a hefty insurance payout if the whole place had been destroyed? Fire and flood, the publisher’s friends, the time honoured way of disposing of overstock, the unsaleable, the bright ideas that didn’t work, the superseded, the discredited. People still talked about the great floods of the past. Or publishers and insurance investigators still did. Publishers standing waist deep in flooded warehouses, tossing box after box of unsold stock into the waters of oblivion.

But wouldn’t you disable the sprinkler system first if you wanted to burn the place down?

‘And don’t start believing that old story about publishers burning themselves down. Why would I set fire to my own office? You might burn down a warehouse but not your bloody office. If the sprinkler system hadn’t worked, the whole lot would have gone up in flames, the office upstairs, the computers, the files, the billing records, the lot. Can you imagine trying to replace all that? It would be a nightmare. Might as well pack it in altogether as try.’

‘Get an insurance payout and upgrade?’ Plant said. It had to be suggested at some time or other, just to gauge Turner’s reaction, if nothing else.

Turner gave him a filthy look.

‘What did the fire brigade say?’ Plant asked.

‘They didn’t come.’

‘Really?’

‘They weren’t called. Like I said, the sprinkler system kicked in and put it out in time. Couldn’t believe it. But there you are. Amazing.’

‘And the police?’

‘The police? No point in involving them. They wouldn’t do anything, not enough damage for them to think it worth bothering with. They’d just say they’d look into it. But look into what? I can’t see them devoting much time to it. There was only that one stack that got burned.’

Geoffry Turner could have been anywhere in his fifties or sixties. Or even seventies. Grey, silvered hair. Silver moustache. Cravat, blue blazer, handkerchief in breast pocket, grey trousers. Polished leather shoes. Style and idiom of a previous century and the old world at that, certainly not part of the brave new contemporary world order, probably unintelligible to it. It could all have been an affectation or he could have been an authentic relic. His name carried the same freight of ambiguity. It was never clear whether the spelling of his first name was a literary allusion or a mistake. Geoffry was spelled as in *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, Henry Kingsley’s colonial-era novel, with its suggestions of a touch of class, of old family squattocracy, exiled squirearchy, together with a suggestion of illiteracy or proofing error, spot on for a publisher. A talking point, anyway. The Paige of Paige Turner P/L provided further possibilities for speculation. Was it part of a hyphenated surname that he had dropped, a family name passed down through the generations, or was it a silent partner or a financial backer? Or an attempt to suggest that there was a backer, that Turner wasn’t out there unsupported on his own, alone and vulnerable? Or was it just something that he had made up to go along with Turner, a snappy, jokey, attention grabbing inspiration, something that seemed like a good idea at the time? Another talking point, anyway.

Turner struck a strangely formal note in the light industrial zone where his office was situated, food supplies and catering companies, olive oil and mineral water importers, frozen dim sums, not a milieu immediately associated with authors and publishing. Nothing differentiated the building from those surrounding it. No vast display signage, no posters for the latest titles, no enlarged covers of best sellers adorning the entrance, just a small brass plate beside the roller-door announcing Paige Turner P/L, but without saying what its business was. Was this modest discretion or conscious concealment? Plant had noticed over the years the way that publishers like other media organizations had shifted their offices out of the city centre into increasingly

remote and inaccessible localities. Don't call us, we'll call you. And don't even think of trying to come out here, you won't find any street address on our website.

'It's not the damage,' Turner said. 'There wasn't that much damage. But I'd sure as hell like to know who did it.'

'In case they try again?'

'So they don't try again. Find out who it is and put a stop to it.'

The vision of violent retribution hung there.

'I'm not sure,' Plant began hesitantly.

'When you find out who it is, then the police can deal with it.'

Plant nodded agreement.

'Or whatever,' Turner added.

The whatever hung there. Like the vision of violent retribution again. Plant didn't like the sound of it. But until something turned up, or he turned something up, nothing was going to be happening. Wait to see if anything did turn up, deal with the whatever then.

'No big deal. It's not the books I'm worried about. It's who's doing it. And why.'

'And the police?'

'I don't want to involve the police. Not if we can help it. Too heavy-handed. Flat-footed. Whatever. Can you imagine them interviewing my authors?'

'You think it's one of your authors?'

'No idea. That's why I called you. It needs some careful enquiries. Might be an author, might not. But I don't want them all upset after a police third degree.'

'And taking their next book elsewhere.'

'That mightn't be a bad thing with some of them. But generally... You get the point.'

'The police would be able to do the forensics.'

'What, a match and some paper? I don't think that would get them very far. What else would they find?'

'They might find they used accelerants to get it really started. Fire lighters. Petrol or kerosene or something.'

'No doubt. But you can buy stuff like that anywhere. They'd never be able to track down where it had been bought. And it would all have been washed away by the sprinkler system, anyway. No, I don't think it's a forensics issue.'

‘What is it, then?’

‘A matter of asking around, wouldn’t you think? Discreet inquiries. Isn’t that what you chaps advertise?’

‘I don’t actually advertise,’ Plant said.

‘But that’s your business, isn’t it? Discreet inquiries. Either that or beat it out of them.’

‘I think the police would be better at the latter.’

Turner looked at him appraisingly.

‘Maybe. Don’t sell yourself short, though.’

They climbed up the metal staircase to the office above.

Turner’s desk was in a corner, partitioned off from the rest of the area where a couple of people sat working. Turner greeted them.

‘Anya, Chloe, this is Plant. Plant, Anya, Chloe. Anya’s the blonde, Chloe’s the redhead.’

And then into his office space, sitting one side of the desk, Plant the other. Usual desk clutter. Computer. Phone. Manuscripts or proofs or correspondence sitting there.

‘Couple of crackers, aren’t they?’ Turner said.

‘Crackers?’

‘Hot stuff. Firecrackers.’

It was not a term of approval Plant had heard for a long time. He wondered, indeed, if he had ever heard it at all. Read it, perhaps. In something about the Edwardian era, maybe.

‘Can’t bear scruffy staff. Got to set a tone. Like those old private eye pulps. They always had a cracker of a secretary. What’s yours like?’

‘I don’t have one,’ Plant said.

Turner expressed surprise.

‘Thought it was part of the job description. How do you manage?’

‘I manage.’

Turner looked at him doubtfully.

‘So,’ said Plant, ‘any suggestions?’

‘Not a clue.’

‘Some author you’ve rejected?’

‘More than likely.’

‘Dissatisfied staff? Someone you sacked?’

‘Always possible. Not that I do much sacking. They usually just go and leave me in the lurch.’

‘Business rivals? Someone you outbid on a manuscript?’

‘Doubt it.’

‘Somebody defamed in one of your books?

‘Not impossible.’

‘So you don’t have any ideas.’

‘If I did I wouldn’t have needed to call you, would I?’

‘I suppose not,’ Plant agreed. Though it didn’t necessarily follow. Turner could have suggested someone to follow up. But he didn’t.

‘Can I get a catalogue of your books?’

‘No. Don’t do catalogues any more. Those days are gone.’

‘So you don’t have a list of what’s in print?’

‘It’s all on the website. Or it should be. You can find everything there. That’s assuming my efficient staff have remembered to keep it updated.’

‘Do you sell on-line?’

‘More and more, yes. And e-books, of course.’

‘You do a lot of them?’

‘More and more.’

Plant looked round the office, smiled at Anya and Chloe, came up with a thought.

‘If someone really wanted to burn you down,’ he began.

‘As they seem to,’ Turner said.

‘Maybe. But it’s a bit primitive, isn’t it? If they really wanted to cause you strife, wouldn’t it be more effective to hack into your computers? Mess up your website? Trash all your editing and formatting? Put a virus or two into your system?’

‘If they knew how to.’

‘So we’re looking at a rank amateur.’

Turner shrugged.

‘You’re the one doing the looking,’ he said.

Plant nodded.

‘But it looks like that,’ Turner conceded.

‘Unless they just want it to look like that, of course.’

‘Of course.’

Outside in the streets the recurrent sound of the sirens sang, police, fire, ambulance. The midday sun beat down remorselessly. Dust from the demolition of the old and the construction of new apartment block after apartment block choked the lungs of the frail and asthmatic who had ventured out. Smoke from bushfires beyond the city contributed a grey, acrid haze to finish them off. In the Paige Turner office the somewhat chill air-conditioning hummed away.

‘How did you get into the business?’ Plant asked. Relaxed. Conversationally. It was always advisable to find out as much as you could about your client. Or at least as much as your client was willing to divulge. And then consider what might have been left out.

‘Tying parcels,’ Turner said.

‘Tying parcels?’

‘The basic skill of the book trade. If you can’t wrap up a parcel and tie a knot, you shouldn’t be in publishing. That’s how I began. Started off working for a distributor despatching books.’

‘And that’s it?’

‘That’s it. That’s what it’s all about. Getting the books out there.’

‘What about editorial policy? How do you chose your titles?’

‘Used to take the author out to lunch, usually.’

‘And then?’

‘If you like the chap you publish him.’

‘Is that how you do it?’

‘Used to. Don’t do it so often now. Most of them are such a pain. The young ones especially. Put you off your food. Give you indigestion. Reflux. Can’t risk an ulcer. Anyway, why waste money taking them to lunch? No need to woo them. They’re always so desperate to get into print, you don’t need to offer them anything.’

‘And what about reading the book?’ Plant ventured. Cautiously. But it didn’t seem to faze Turner.

‘I’m reading one of them now,’ he said, picking up a book from his desk.

‘After it’s published?’

‘Easier to read that way,’ Turner said.

‘And your editorial policy?’

‘Pragmatic. Whatever looks like it might conceivably sell. If it comes with a subsidy, then that’s a sweetener.’

‘What sort of subsidy?’

‘Oh, you know, whoever’s offering. Australia Council, Arts Ministries, Academies, universities. Though with all that form filling in and carry on, they’re hardly worth the bother, most of them, you waste so much bloody time filling in forms and then you end up not getting anything. I’d prefer the old brown paper bag of used notes, to be honest. We’re not fussy. If your basic initiation cost is covered, you’ve got a bit of hope. Company histories, they’re always easy, the company usually buys up the entire run. So you don’t have to worry about sales.’

‘And sales generally?’

‘I’ve got nothing against them.’

‘What sort of figures?’

‘You are an inquisitive one, aren’t you? Not sure how this relates to the fire. Sometimes we strike it rich. Cookbooks do all right. Buy in titles, re-badge them, the editing and formatting and design are already done. Makes it simpler. But it’s still a gamble. You’ve got to get the numbers right.’

‘Do you print here or overseas?’

‘Depends. Small runs it’s cheaper to print here. No freight costs. No shipping delays. But colour printing, that’s still cheaper in Asia. If you’re doing a decent size run. And binding. They’ve still got the old hardback binding equipment going there. So that’s where I do the cookbooks.’

‘Do you do many hardbacks?’

‘For the right titles. You can get a higher retail price for them so get a higher return. Like the motor industry, you make more money on the top of the line models.’

‘So what’s the underlying motivation? Is it about disseminating knowledge? Adding to the cultural heritage? Creating celebrities?’

‘If only I could.’

‘Could what?’

‘Do any of that. I’ve never had the budget to spend on marketing or promotion like the big players. So creating celebrities was way out of my league. Disseminating knowledge and adding to the cultural heritage, well, they’re nice ideas.’

‘What sort of knowledge? Do you have any particular line?’

‘I’m a publisher, not a fisherman.’

‘You know, any particular ideological slant? That might have upset someone enough to want to burn you down.’

‘Ho ho! Is this the coming purge?’

‘No.’

‘Of course it is. Am I now or have I ever been a member of the Communist Party? No, I bloody well never have. Have I published left wing books? Yes, a few, if they looked like they’d sell. Have I published right wing books? Yes, same answer. Am I politically correct? I doubt it.’

‘So it’s basically just business, making money.’

‘If only,’ Turner said. ‘What a nice idea.’

‘I thought you might ask around, you know, discreetly. You know your way round the book trade. You’ve done a bit of fact checking, that sort of thing. Dealt with the odd publisher. What is it your business card says, research assistance, investigative reporting? That’s it, then.’

‘Well,’ Plant said. Demurred, that was the word.

‘And I gather you’ve worked with a few of the writers. Scobie Spruce, Tuscan Bayes, poor old Rock Richmond. What a shower.’

‘You seem to know my client list well.’

‘Pays to check out folk before you hire them.’

‘You checked me out?’ Plant said.

He could feel the spontaneous indignation flare up. But he could hardly express surprise, let alone outrage. It was what he was doing himself, after all, right now. He just hadn’t got around yet to doing the detailed checking out of Turner’s background. But he would. No doubt about that.

‘Oh, well, a chap asks around if he’s sensible. Somebody or other mentioned you some time. Your current line of work. You know how it goes. So when this happened, I thought, Plant,

he's not unacquainted with the industry, he knows the scene, or some of it, so I called you. And here you are.'

Plant nodded. He could feel himself about to say 'Thank you,' but suppressed it.

'So,' Plant said, 'where do we begin?'

'Search me. That's why I'm hiring you.'

'Do you have any idea at all who might have done this?'

'Of course not. If I did I wouldn't be asking you, would I?'

Maybe not, but there again, maybe, Plant reflected. Silently.

'Do you have any obvious enemies?'

'Of course I do. I'm a publisher.'

'So you have enemies.'

'Goes with the territory. Rejected authors. Unsuccessful authors. Successful authors who feel they should do even better.'

'Staff?'

'Incompetent editors. Useless designers.'

'People you've sacked?'

'Mainly people looking for jobs and I turned them down.'

'Are there a lot of them?'

'There are these days.'

'What about people you gave jobs too and then sacked them?'

'Never get much opportunity to sack people any more. Like I said, they just cut and run.'

'Where do they go?'

'Get another job. Go travelling. Get married. I don't know. No one sticks at things any more.'

'But no one in particular who might...?'

'Want to burn me down? Hardly.'

Plant went back down to the garage area, Turner following.

'CCTV,' he said. 'You didn't say you'd got CCTV coverage.'

'No,' Turner agreed. 'I didn't. We don't.'

‘But...’ Plant said, looking at a camera in the ceiling.

‘Not working. Went on the blink and I never got around to having it fixed. Didn’t seem important. There’s always some system cocking up, computers, internet, can’t keep up with it.’

‘How long ago did it stop working?’

Turner shrugged. ‘A month. Couple of months, maybe.’

‘Convenient.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Well, if it had been working, you’d have known who started the fire.’

‘Maybe. Unless they were wearing masks and stuff.’

‘Sure. But what if someone knew the CCTV wasn’t working? Or they’d disabled it?’

‘Possible,’ Turner agreed.

‘How did they get in?’

‘Forced the roller door. Picked the lock or something.’

‘Or used a key?’

‘Maybe. It’s just a standard door. Cheap lock.’

‘So not that secure?’

‘Who steals books any more?’ Turner asked.

‘Did they ever?’

Turner grunted.

‘They may not steal them but someone obviously likes to burn them,’ Plant said.

‘Yes, well, who could have predicted that was going to happen again?’ He gave Plant a long, quizzical look. ‘Though,’ he added, ‘you’d have to be pretty blinkered to imagine it wouldn’t, wouldn’t you?’

Plant took a closer look at the boxes ranged against the wall. There were not that many of them.

‘You don’t hold a lot of stock?’

‘No need to these days. Print on demand pretty much. Do a sensible initial run and if it takes off, print some more. You don’t have to do it all in one go and store the damn things any more like you used to.’

They were strong cardboard boxes, raised off the concrete floor on wooden pallets. Heavy plastic sheeting draped over them had protected them from damage when the sprinkler

system kicked in, and the pallets they were stacked on had kept them clear of the puddles of water on the concrete floor. The pile of charred and burned boxes, though, was sodden. They were burned top and bottom, blackened and disintegrating from the combination of fire and water. What seemed to have been the plastic sheeting covering them had been dragged across to the top of the neighbouring stack of books. Presumably this had been done in the course of starting the fire. But it had also ensured water-damage when the sprinklers saturated the boxes, unprotected by the sheeting. Unintended consequences? Were there ever such?

The boxes on the top of the damaged stack had been opened, the plasticized tape sealing them torn off, the cardboard flaps ripped apart. It looked as though someone had removed a handful of copies, ripped the pages from their binding, and tossed them back on top. It would have made it easier to ignite them. Maybe an accelerant had been used. Plant could not be sure whether he was detecting a faint smell of petrol or kerosene. The books further down in the boxes were charred and sodden. Plant lifted the disintegrating boxes onto the ground and opened the ones beneath. He pulled at the sodden cardboard, tearing the tops loose, and took out a book, damp, warped, its pages sticking together. No signs of burning, but nonetheless unsaleable. Turner stood watching him.

'Do you mind if I take one of these?' Plant asked.

'Evidence?'

'Could be.'

'Feel free. Take two,' he added, for no particular reason that Plant could see.

Plant took two.

'Incidentally,' Plant asked, preparing to leave, 'who is the Paige in Paige Turner?'

'Alas, poor Paige.'

'You knew him well, but he died?'

'He tried to turn over a new leaf.'

'So he did exist.'

'He or she? Or did my parents christen me with their gift of a name? What a destiny that ensured! A romantic novelist or a concert pianist's assistant. A thriller writer or a publisher. Who would have guessed? Did they, one wonders?'

'So he or she's not around any more?'

Turner looked around, gestured with his arms, this way, that way, opening them wide.

‘The one that got away,’ he said. All enigmatic humour and bluff impermeability.

Chapter 2

Plant drove across from Marrickville to Fullalove’s inner-city hovel in Newtown. His unwashed, white Hyundai was covered with a coating of red soil blown in from the inland dust bowl that agro-business had created. He switched on the wipers and sprayed the windscreen with water a couple of times before he could see clearly. The drive took all of ten minutes, windows tight shut to keep out the traffic fumes and the choking bushfire smoke, the pall of haze from some controlled hazard reduction burn-offs gone out of control.

Fullalove’s ungentrified narrow terrace was lined inside on every wall with the books that would one day make his fortune, all the unacceptable, politically incorrect, extreme radical and reactionary texts, all the salacious and suggestive and sexist pornography that would be bought by people who did not want their reading monitored by the internet or library or bookshop or credit card records. Hard copies for cash. Fullalove’s vision of surveillance capitalism and how to make money by circumventing it. The project was still in its development stage, primary accrual, nothing yet having been sold as far as Plant was aware. It was a convenient place to stay, even if increasingly cramped for space as the books piled in.

‘So,’ Fullalove said, ‘case solved? All settled? He set fire to it himself.’

‘Not very successfully if it was him. Burned a few boxes and that was it. Then the sprinkler system kicked in.’

‘Water-damage.’

‘Yes.’

‘So an insurance claim.’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t call the police. Might be difficult to make the claim.’

‘Fire brigade?’

‘No, didn’t call them either.’

‘Lucky it wasn’t one of those five hundred apartment blocks round the city they’ve fitted with flammable cladding. The whole lot would have gone up.’ Fullalove chuckled at the thought of it, at the vision of Armageddon. ‘Undoubtedly dodgy.’

‘Maybe. But why does he call me if he did it himself?’

‘To make it look good.’

‘Who to?’

‘Anyone who asks. Police. Fire department. Insurance.’

‘How’s hiring me going to make him look good? If he didn’t call the police or fire brigade he can’t make an insurance claim. So none of them are going to know about it anyway. And if he did it himself he’d have done a better job, surely.’

Fullalove considered it. He rolled a joint to consider it more deeply.

‘So why was it a lousy job? Does he publish poetry? Some incompetent poet did it, maybe?’

‘I checked his web-site,’ Plant said. ‘He doesn’t publish poetry.’

‘There you are then. It doesn’t mean it wasn’t a psycho poet that did it, could’ve been a protest that he doesn’t publish poetry. Never rule them out, poets.’

Plant was sceptical.

‘Was it meant as some kind of a warning, maybe?’ he asked.

Fullalove considered it some more before passing the joint across. ‘Like protection? Pay up or next time we’ll really burn you down?’

‘Could be. Though I’ve never heard of it with publishers.’

‘Maybe it’s the area where he has the office. Though if it was a protection racket he’d know who’d done it, wouldn’t he? And who to pay to stop it.’

‘If he did know he didn’t tell me.’

‘Which makes it unlikely.’

‘Which makes it possible he doesn’t know who did it and he really wants me to find out.’

‘But he doesn’t want to involve the police or fire service or insurance because he’s up to something dodgy himself.’

‘What’s the book, then?’ Fullalove asked.

Plant handed him one of the warped, damp copies he’d souvenired.

Fullalove read out the title.

‘*Illiberal Liberals: The Lies of Liberalism*. Sounds promising.’

He tried to open it but the pages were stuck together.

‘Maybe some liberal didn’t like it and took illiberal measures.’

‘Could be,’ Fullalove agreed, always open to a political interpretation. ‘I’ll dry it out and have a look. Can’t do anything now without ripping the pages. What did Turner have to say about it?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? What about the others?’

‘What others?’

‘The other books that got burned.’

‘They didn’t. This was the only one.’

‘Just this?’ Fullalove said, in puzzlement, holding it up.

‘Well, there were boxes of it.’

‘But just this title?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Turner didn’t remark on it?’

‘No.’

‘Doesn’t that strike you as weird?’

‘I don’t think he thought it was a particular book they were after. I guess he just assumed it was the whole warehouse they wanted to burn down.’

‘But this was the only title that was set fire to.’

‘It is a bit odd.’ Plant agreed. ‘These were nearest the door, though.’

‘It’s odd he didn’t think it might be this specific book.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

‘You mightn’t,’ Fullalove said.

‘But you do?’

‘Let’s put it like this,’ Fullalove said. ‘I may not know, but I suspect.’

‘And what precisely is it that you suspect?’

‘What I suspect is that it was this particular title that was targeted.’

‘And who do you suspect targeted it?’

‘Besides some illiberal liberal? Turner would still have to be number one.’

‘Even though he’s hired me to find out who did it?’

‘Especially because he’s hired you.’

‘And why me in particular?’

Fullalove took the joint out of his mouth and pulled a face. One of those sceptical, enigmatic, I told you so faces.

‘Is this a reflection on my crime-solving abilities?’

Fullalove laughed. Not a common occurrence.

‘Not necessarily negatively,’ he conceded. ‘Turner might want the challenge. Like Moriarty taking on Sherlock Holmes. A duel to the death. Could be fun.’

‘Fun?’

‘Not a lot of fun around these days.’

‘Fun.’

‘Get it while you can,’ Fullalove advised. ‘While you can still enjoy it.’

‘Why would Turner set fire to a book he’d just published?’ Plant persisted.

‘Good question. Now you’re getting somewhere.’

‘Getting where?’

‘To the nature of publishing.’

‘Go on,’ Plant said, wearily.

‘You might in your innocence think that publishing is about issuing books. Disseminating knowledge. But like everything else, it’s an ambiguous activity.’

‘Of course,’ Plant muttered.

‘As much as disseminating knowledge, publishing can suppress it.’

‘Tell me.’

‘You issue a book and fail to promote it. Fail to send out review copies. Fail to put the barcode on the cover. Consequently it doesn’t sell so you pulp it. Triumph of the free press in the free society. No censorship. Just market forces.’

‘Is that the way it’s done?’ Plant asked, not concealing a note of scepticism.

‘It’s the way I’d do it,’ Fullalove said.

‘Why not just leave it to market forces?’ Plant asked. ‘Why set fire to it?’

‘Maybe market forces would have made it successful if it ever got into the shops. Can’t take the risk of that. So strangle it at birth.’

‘And you really think that’s what happened?’

‘It’s a scenario. It’s a possibility.’

‘I’ve never heard of a publisher setting fire to a book he’s just published.’

‘Well, you wouldn’t, would you? It’s not something they’d go around boasting about.’

‘It’s ridiculous.’

‘Doesn’t mean it isn’t true.’

Fullalove picked up the copy of *Illiberal Liberals* again, tried to flick through the sodden pages without success.

‘What do you think? Put it in the oven on a low heat? Like slow cooking? Or sit it in the window where the sun comes in?’

Outside the sun blazed in the cloudless sky above the pollution and smoke, but Plant had never known it to make it’s way through the narrow frontage of Fullalove’s hovel. The windows were usually curtained, anyway, in keeping with Fullalove’s world view, a view best shrouded from observation.

‘Look it up on the internet,’ Plant suggested. Dismissively, but it still provoked Fullalove.

‘And let the combined intelligence forces of the free world know what we’re doing?’

‘Seems unlikely they’d be interested in drying out books.’

‘Don’t be so sure. There could be other examples of this. It could be a global purge. Saturating politically troublesome books. Operation Dampdown. It could be widespread. Another Noah’s flood.’

‘Really?’

‘And no one’s going to go public about it. No publishers are going to give a press release on their latest warehouse fire or water-damaged stock. It would all be kept quiet. So you’d never know.’

‘I guess I wouldn’t,’ Plant said. ‘And I don’t believe a word of it.’

‘You don’t have to believe it, best not to believe anything. Just let it hang there as a possibility. A thought form waiting to be embodied.’

‘Before being disembodied by fire and flood?’

‘Exac’ly,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘Something like that, exac’ly. You’ll get the hang of it.’

He put the copy of *Illiberal Liberals* on the kitchen windowsill.

‘Thanks for that. I’ll hold on to it. You never know. The sun might dry it out. Could end up being worth a lot of money if all the other copies got destroyed.’

Chapter 3

‘What do you know about Turner?’ Plant asked.

‘Buy me lunch and I’ll tell you,’ Fullalove offered.

‘Buy you lunch?’

‘A man’s got to eat and you’ve got a retainer.’

Both statements were undeniable. There was rarely any ambiguity with Fullalove. A refreshing forthrightness, Plant told himself, told Fullalove in fact.

‘There’s a refreshing forthrightness about your demands,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Fullalove agreed.

‘Do you know anything about Turner?’

‘Buy me lunch and you’ll find out.’

‘So what do you know about Turner?’ Plant asked again. The threefold knocking on the door of epic tradition.

‘Probably not a lot more than you do. He’s probably in financial trouble. He’s obviously not doing any good.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because if he was doing any good he’d have sold out.’

‘Why would you sell out if you were doing well?’

‘Because that’s the whole point of it. Set up a press, get a good enough list, look prosperous, and then the multinational conglomerates rush in and take you over to remove the competition and you take the money and run. Why else would you set up the business?’

‘And the fact that he’s still in business and hasn’t been taken over means he’s not doing well?’

‘I would’ve thought so.’

Plant shook his head reflectively at the world of low finance and global expansionism.

‘Paige Turner publishing. Who is Paige?’ Fullalove asked.

‘No one seems to know.’

‘Really? Don’t you?’

‘No.’

‘Did you ask?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Nothing. Made a joke about it.’

‘There you are then,’ Fullalove said.

‘Where?’

‘The first mystery. As soon as you ask questions about him, you hit something dodgy.’

‘It’s not necessarily dodgy. It’s just a question.’

‘But no one knows the answer. No one.’

‘Not even you.’

‘Exac’ly,’ Fullalove agreed.

‘So?’

‘So we speculate. Could be a silent partner. Except if he or she was really silent we wouldn’t know their name. Could be his original partner he bumped off.’

‘Bumped off? What evidence is there for that?’ Plant asked, not without exasperation.

‘Not a lot.’

‘Not a lot?’

‘None.’

‘You can’t just go around saying he bumped off his partner.’

‘Why not? It’s happened before. Never underestimate the opposition.’

‘He’s not the opposition. He’s my client.’

‘They’re not incompatible. You need to take care. You’re too trusting.’

‘Trusting?’

It was not how he thought of himself.

‘Alternatively,’ Fullalove offered, through a mouthful of pad thai, ‘there never was a Paige.’

‘Go on.’

‘A blank page, if you like. Costs nothing, a blank page. No typesetting, no ink, just a private joke.’

‘A private joke?’

‘A page turner, you know.’

‘More like a public joke.’

‘Same difference. Gets people talking. Thinking. You remember it. Clever touch. Turner probably just made it up.’

‘So why does he spell it Paige with an i?’

‘Because he probably figured that somebody else might have had the same bright idea, it’s so bleeding obvious, and then he’d get done for using a registered trade name, so he added in the i to play it safe.’

‘You’re saying he’s a jokester. But he looks so straight up and down.’

‘That’s probably a joke too. You can never be sure about those straight types. All an act. Never know what they really are or what they’re really up to. You have to assume they’re dodgy.’

‘Maybe,’ Plant said, dubiously, uncertainly. ‘Maybe Paige was his mother’s maiden name, or something. Or his second Christian name.’

‘No, I checked that, it isn’t. Not according to *Who’s Who*, anyway,’ Fullalove said. ‘And he may not be a Christian, for that matter.’

‘Is he in *Who’s Who*?’

‘Yes. That’s how I checked him out.’

‘So what else? Go on.’

‘Five years in the army. Goes and works in publishing in the U.K. Then in the Australian branch of a U.K. publisher. Then sets up on his own. Must have got sacked.’

‘Do you actually know that he was sacked?’

‘No. But why else would he set up on his own?’

Plant drained his jasmine tea and poured himself another cup. Of course there would have to have been something dodgy if Fullalove looked into it. Getting sacked, if he was sacked. Five years in the army. Dodgy enough for Plant.

‘What was he doing in the army?’

‘Take your pick. Anything from military intelligence to catering corps.’

‘Which?’

‘*Who’s Who* doesn’t say.’

‘Meaning he chose not to tell them.’

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove agreed.

'Could be catering corps. He mentioned he did cookbooks. Might explain how he got into them.'

'Why not?' Fullalove asked, cynically, content, replete, traces of noodles around his unshaven chin, the pot of jasmine tea drained. Never one to surrender a security services angle on anything.

'You need to take a look at his list,' Fullalove said. 'The complete list. Not just what's in print but what's out of print. Could be some author's got resentful about not being reprinted. Or someone whose book bombed.'

'Would he tell?'

'You think he'd claim they were all best-sellers?'

'Hard to know.'

'Hard to believe. Check out the list anyway. It'll basically be stuff the multinationals won't publish. An expanding range of material in this era of soft fascism. See if any well known psycho authors pop up.'

'How do we know they're psycho?'

'Just assume they are. Check the topics they write on, that's usually a give-away. Check your memory, see if you've met any of them at some time. Get them to fill you in on Turner and what game they think he's playing.'

'Is he playing one?'

Even as he said it, Plant realized it was a stupid question. Stupid to ask Fullalove, anyway, since Fullalove always assumed that most people were likely to be playing some game or other.

'Let's go then,' Fullalove said, getting up from the table and heading for the street while Plant paid the bill.

'Let's go where?'

'Check out Paige Turner's back-list on the web.'

'I thought you said, if I remember correctly, that doing an on-line search would automatically alert the combined intelligence agencies of the free world.'

‘There are ways around it.’

‘What ways?’

‘Follow me,’ Fullalove said.

‘Where?’ Plant asked as they headed out into the traffic fumes and pedestrians of King Street.

‘Library,’ Fullalove said, increasingly monosyllabic as he headed into the chase. He positively strode along the footpath.

‘What’s the hurry?’ Plant asked, pretty well gasped.

‘Exercise. Heart rate. Fitness. Do it while you can.’

Supplementary ID, as Fullalove called it, rather than false ID, was no longer that easy to establish. But a supplementary library card was not too difficult. Some dead associate. Some departed transient. Just produce the library card and go to the computer. No other ID needed as long as you used one of the libraries the card was valid for. Then the internet could be searched, if not with absolute anonymity, at least with something or other, ease, calm. Fullalove offered the facilities free to Plant. It simply meant that Fullalove had to be there with Plant since he was known at the library, or his card was known there. Under the supplementary ID name.

‘If you go in alone there’s the chance someone might remember the card and realize you don’t look like me. And then I’m scuppered. I don’t want anything going wrong. If they cancel that card, what am I going to do?’

‘Create a new identity.’

‘Yeah, well, it isn’t that easy any more. I need to hang onto this stuff.’

‘I thought identity theft was easier than ever with the internet.’

‘I am not getting into identity theft.’

‘Sure. Whatever you say. I believe you.’

Plant wasn’t sure that he did believe him. Wasn’t the supplementary library card already identity theft? Whatever it was, it was useful. They logged onto the Paige Turner website and Turner’s Wikipedia entry. Plant skimmed through them.

‘This is all perfectly innocuous,’ he said.

‘Nothing is innocuous, perfectly or imperfectly, under surveillance capitalism,’ Fullalove assured him. ‘If Turner was in military intelligence...’

‘But we don’t know that,’ Plant interrupted.

‘If he was in intelligence in the military he’s probably still in it and we obviously wouldn’t know that.’

‘If he ever was,’ Plant repeated sceptically.

‘Never hurts to take the worst case scenario.’

Paige Turner’s back-list was there on-line. No apparent political or ideological stance. Just an eclectic mix. Incoherent, looked at in one way. Pragmatic, looked at differently. Maybe just whatever turned up. Plant made a note of any authors there that he’d met. Over the years. In a variety of contexts. Not all in the course of investigations. He might give a call to the more approachable of them. See what they had to say about Turner. Even some of the less approachable ones. The more difficult they were, the more revealing they might be. The specifics of Turner’s military service remained unrecorded.

‘We’ll leave it that way,’ Fullalove said. ‘No way we’re going into military records. If he was in intelligence, which he probably was, being a publisher, then his name would be flagged and anything you log onto about him will ring a bell, which is an outcome you could probably do without.’

‘Going by all the cookbooks he’s got listed, he could’ve been in the catering corps,’ Plant said.

‘Or that could be the cover story.’

‘And the cookbooks?’

‘More of the same?’

‘Why?’

‘Well, if he calls you about a dodgy fire, you’ve got to wonder what dodgy business he was up to.’

‘And cookbooks are dodgy?’

‘Have you ever seen them?’

‘I can’t say I have. Not his. Not my sort of thing.’

‘Nor mine. That’s why you need to take a careful look at them. I’ve got a couple back home.’

‘What, in your politically incorrect collection? Politically incorrect cookbooks?’

‘Not exac’ly,’ Fullalove said. ‘But interesting.’

Back in his house, if house it could be called any more, more like a book warehouse with kitchen attached, Fullalove fossicked around amongst his treasures.

‘They’re interesting books,’ he said. ‘If you’re interested in publishing. Turner got onto a good thing.’

He found what he wanted, came back into the kitchen from the stacked shelves along the hallway.

‘Check out these,’ he said, handing three books over to Plant. Indian recipes. Thai recipes. Turkish recipes. Large format, heavy hardback books, not in a uniform size, not in a series, the titles and texts in different fonts from each other, individual design. Plant opened them, turned to the title page and the verso, shared imprints with publishers in India, Thailand and Turkey.

‘He got onto a good thing. Probably on his dodgy travels. It’s been done before but if it works, why not do it again? He must have noticed there were these English language recipe books in the tourist shops. They’re aimed at tourists. Visitors. Sold in resorts and airports mainly. And he got the bright idea of importing them and selling them here. No work to do, no dealing with authors or photographers or whatever, they were already written and designed and printed. All he had to do was get his imprint on them. He was clever about it. He did a shared imprint with the original publisher so they had like a certificate of authentic ethnicity. Then he gets his own imprint on them like a certificate of approval from an Australian publisher so it looks like it’s aimed specifically at the local market. Not just a cheap buy-in from the third world. Which of course it is. But it gives the purchaser confidence they’re not going to get food poisoning or malnutrition or anything.’

‘Nice idea,’ Plant said, looking through the books, full of colour plates full of colourful food, beautifully produced. ‘So why do his travels have to be dodgy?’

‘Why would he be travelling through all those places?’

‘To buy cookbook rights, perhaps?’

‘You don’t really believe that, do you?’ Fullalove asked in tones of sad disbelief.

‘Why not?’

‘Because it would all be perfect cover for something else.’

‘For what?’

‘That’s for you to find out.’

‘No, it isn’t. I’m trying to find out who set fire to his warehouse.’

‘Same thing.’

‘What do you mean, same thing?’

‘The fire could have been in response to something that he’s up to, and if you look at what he publishes, that way you can see what he’s up to.’

‘What?’

‘Dodgy travel in dodgy places.’

‘For what dodgy purpose?’

‘Take your pick. Usual choice. Espionage, sex tourism, or drugs.’

‘Sometimes...’ Plant began.

‘Sometimes I amaze you with my insights,’ Fullalove said, with unfeigned satisfaction.

‘Whatever...’ Plant said, shaking his head wearily.

‘You know I’m always right,’ Fullalove persisted. ‘You know it’s probably true. One or the other. Spookery, sex or drugs.’

And it probably was, Plant reflected, or it could well be.

‘All you’ve got to do is find the evidence.’

Chapter 4

Whether Turner was as dodgy as Fullalove speculated, Plant remained uncertain. Fullalove assumed that most businesses were dodgy. Maybe he was right. To stay in business, the publishing business, as Turner had managed to do, you had to be flexible, opportunist. Not to have been taken over could have been a sign that his business was unattractive to predators, or that he believed in what he was doing, had integrity and an agenda. Or lacked integrity and still had an agenda. There would have been times when Turner had needed funds desperately, and others when it seemed like you could risk an indulgence, and who knew what the implications and consequences of those situations were, what decisions had been taken, what deals done.

Plant phoned the Paige Turner office. Turner was out.

‘It’s Plant,’ Plant said. ‘I need to get in touch with him.’

‘I’ll tell him you called,’ Chloe said.

‘Have you got his mobile number?’

‘I’m not supposed to give it out.’

‘Supposed?’

‘Allowed.’

Dutiful, loyal employees. Plant suppressed his exasperation.

‘I need to get in touch with Adam Redman.’

There was a silence.

‘The author of *Illiberal Liberals*,’ he said. ‘The book that got set fire to.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have a number for him? Or an address?’

‘I’m not supposed to give that out, either.’

Plant swore. He knew you were no longer supposed to swear. You’d never been supposed to. But now you were not even allowed to, not to young ladies of tender years. Or any years.

‘Look, I’m investigating the fire that burned Redman’s book. Or trying to,’ he added.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Do you know who started it?’

‘No, I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking for Redman’s address to see if he has any ideas.’

‘Why would he have any ideas?’

She sounded fully, professionally uncooperative.

‘Well, it was his books that were set fire to, which suggests he may have been targeted.’

‘They mightn’t have known it was his books. Whoever did it. I mean, why would anyone want to burn his books? Rather than any of the others?’

‘That’s what I’m attempting to find out,’ Plant said. ‘Which is why I need to ask him if he has any ideas.’

‘I can’t imagine that he would.’

‘Maybe. But I’d like to hear that from him. If he doesn’t have any ideas. But on the off chance that he does have some ideas, I need to talk to him.’

There was another silence, silent thought or silent prevarication. In the end she capitulated.

‘I can give you a number,’ she said.

Adam Redman answered on the second ring.

‘Yes,’ he said. Challengingly. Not conducive to suggesting a bit of relaxed chit-chat. He might as well have said ‘No.’

Plant plunged in, breasted the waves, said who he was, announced his business, requested a meeting.

‘About bloody time,’ Redman said. ‘Fucking barbarians. I said it would happen again. Back to the age of book burning. What’s Turner up to? Why doesn’t he stop pussy-footing around and do something? Issue a press release. Take a stand. Why should we take this lying down?’

Plant made sounds of sympathetic agreement.

‘Do you have any idea who might have done it?’ he asked.

‘Do I have any idea? Of course I fucking do. I have every fucking idea. It’s bloody obvious.’

Plant waited for the answer. Culprit found in one. End of problem. End of case.

‘So who?’ he prompted.

‘Are you mad? Over the fucking phone? You must be joking.’

‘Ah,’ Plant said. Familiar territory. ‘So would you prefer to meet?’

‘For what it’s worth,’ Redman said, ungracious to the end.

‘What’s your address?’

‘What’s yours?’

‘I don’t actually have one in Sydney,’ Plant said, without going into details of where he lived and why he was staying at Fortress Fullalove, and in no way wanting to meet anyone there, and not just from respect for Fullalove’s privacy.

‘So nor do I,’ Redman said.

‘Where do you suggest, then?’

‘Where do I suggest? I don’t fucking know. Where do you want to meet?’

‘Where’s convenient?’

‘Nowhere’s convenient.’

‘What about at Paige Turner’s?’

‘No fucking way. Not going anywhere near that shyster.’

It was a promising lead in itself. Even if the terminology sounded a bit retro. But it was not, Plant felt, the appropriate moment to start asking questions about its implications.

In the end they settled on somewhere in the inner-city at Plant’s suggestion. Redman was clearly not going to commit himself to nominating any place of rendezvous, not give any indication of anywhere that he might know of or frequent or be familiar with. Which again was interesting in itself.

‘Jubilee Park in Glebe, down Glebe Point Road,’ Plant suggested. Where they could walk around without their conversation being monitored, which seemed to be Redman’s requirement, given his refusal to say anything over the phone.

‘Whereabouts in the park? Redman asked.

Good question. It was a large area.

‘How about the light rail stop?’

‘Which side?’

The man was a nightmare.

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said. ‘One side or the other.’

‘How will we recognize each other?’

‘I’ll be carrying a folded newspaper,’ Plant offered. It was the traditional way, surely.

‘Which paper?’

How much worse could it get? How many people carried newspapers any more? How many newspapers still existed? How could you tell the title if it was folded?

‘Preferably a free one,’ Plant said.

Plant waited at the light rail stop, free street paper in hand. You could hardly call them newspapers. No sign of Redman. A couple of trains came and went from different directions. Then Redman entered the platform from outside.

‘You didn’t come on the light rail then?’

‘No. No point having an opal card register where I’m coming from and going to.’

‘Fair enough,’ Plant said, having come by car rather than the light rail for the same reason.

They walked down through the park to the water's edge. Redman looked around, looked back from where they had come. There was no one walking or jogging or kite-flying or leading dogs or children near them, no one sitting on any bench nearby.

'Well, it's bleeding obvious, isn't it?' Redman said. 'Fucking security services. ASIO or Special Branch or some Defence Force directorate.'

'You reckon?'

'Who else would it be?'

'I don't know,' Plant admitted.

'Have you read the book?' Redman demanded, giving him a hard look, one of those eyes piercing to the core number. The ones before which you cannot tell a lie. Plant chose not to, anyway.

'I'm still trying to dry out a copy.'

Redman swore some more. Blasphemed this time. At some point after reading *Grace Abounding* Plant had foresworn blasphemy and resolved just to stick with scatological and sexual imprecations, probably a wrong choice in the era of political correctness and irreligion. Redman apparently had no such inhibitions.

'Give me your email address and I'll send you a PDF of it.'

'You don't have any hard copies?'

Redman let fly a few more obscenities and expletives.

'Not any more after that fucking fiasco. All of six author's copies and that's it. The rest gone up in flames. They didn't even get the review copies out.'

'But they got you your copies.'

'Big deal. A lot of use they are. Chloe gave me a call to go in and pick them up when they arrived. If she hadn't done that there wouldn't have been a single copy that survived. I'd never even have seen it before they all got incinerated.'

Plant could have said they didn't actually get incinerated, not for long, they were ultimately drowned to death rather than burned. But he figured it was better to leave the talking to Redman. And Redman off the phone needed no encouragement.

Adam Redman had set his heart on being a journalist. A champion for the truth. An international purveyor of enlightenment. Writing revelations of corruption in high places. He had gone to

university, taken a degree in media studies, found that it qualified him for nothing and had no industry credibility. Not that the media industry itself had much credibility any more. But he got himself onto a local give-away newspaper, ran a few stories on parking issues and development protests. Made an opportunistic move onto one of the remaining dailies, where he had a brief career being moved from desk to desk, acquiring a bit of knowledge about lots of things but nothing in much detail about anything. It wasn't what he had hoped for, not at all, but he stuck at it until the next wave of mass redundancies. When voluntary early retirement offers failed to achieve the required quota of job cuts that the accountants had specified, the rule of thumb of 'last in, first out' was applied. And he was out. He hung on in journalism with some hand to mouth freelancing and supplemented it with a job in a bookshop, until the bookshop closed, unable to compete with on-line discounters.

He was down, but not defeated. After a period of rage and despair he decided to persist in his ambition and now write all the stories he could never have got printed. If he couldn't get them into the papers, he would turn them into a book.

'So tell me about yourself and about the book,' Plant began.

'Myself? What's that got to do with anything?' Redman asked.

'The more I know about you and about the book, the more likely I am to find out who started the fire. Whoever it is could be targeting you and not specifically the book. Or vice versa. They could be targeting the book rather than you. If you see what I mean.'

'Not really,' Redman said, unhelpfully.

'Tell me anyway.'

They walked along the track beside the water. Rozelle Bay. Blackwattle Bay. Across the water the traffic droned steadily over the Glebe Island bridge, as it used to be called, until in an act of militaristic revivalism it was renamed the Anzac Bridge. The traffic was not loud enough to drown out their conversation from any surveillance device. Plant could not claim that. But there was no one walking along behind them or in parallel. They didn't stop and sit on any park bench that might have been bugged. And there were no drones circling around them or hovering overhead. Plant kept these observations to himself. No need to spell them out. He could sense what Redman was thinking. Years of conversation with Fullalove had habituated him to the thought processes of paranoia. It was all comfortably familiar.

'So why the security services?'

‘If you’d read the book you wouldn’t need to ask.’

The eternal cry of the unread author.

‘But I haven’t been able to so I do need to ask. What’s the book about?’

‘It’s about the way we live now. The destruction of the socialist tradition. The demolition of regulation. The marginalisation of trades unions. The loss of full time employment and the casualization of the work force. The destruction of the church and the family so that no other value system remains except consumerism. Cash values. Free market, free trade, free movement of labour, mass immigration to force down wages and to provide baby-sitters and gardeners and care-home carers for the rich. The denial of any alternative social organization to capitalism. And all the bullshit of identity politics that have destroyed the old left... women’s liberation, gay liberation, transgenderism, all the liberal bullshit about human rights and racism while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

‘Look at immigration policy. Bring in incompatible ethnic groups... African, Indian, Asian, Middle Eastern... so that there will be no solidarity of labour against their exploitation. Immigration is sourced from non-industrialized countries with no trade union tradition. That way there won’t be any concerted political action for improved wages and conditions because the different groups don’t form any alliance with each other. They’ll just compete with each other to get work and so force down wages. You say anything about it, you’re immediately labelled racist. But the racism is in the formulation of immigration policies. Multiculturalism was the updated strategy of divide and rule. And the impact is on the existing working class. Undercut their wages and conditions. Totally disrupt their communities with alien culture. None of this impinges on the ruling elite except to provide them with docile servants and nannies and cheap labour in hospitality and health care.’

‘And this is the theme of your book?

‘A theme. One of them.’

‘And the others?’

‘Cultural degradation. The dumbing down of the media. Bring in a non-English speaking workforce with a couple of hundred different languages. Reduce the vocabulary on television to a minimum. Seven hundred words max. Enough for the advertisements to be understood. Inevitably that becomes the reduced vocabulary of drama and documentary. Abandon any sense

of our cultural tradition so that there's no continuity with the heritage. Just import American crap. That be your vocabulary, that be your culture, oh Australia.'

Plant nodded. Nodded wisely, as it used to be written. Nodded to show comprehension. As for agreement, these were explosive themes. Redman continued them remorselessly.

'The women's movement, you can't say anything about that.'

'But you do?'

'You bet I do. Women in the workforce. What has that achieved? What it's done is help keep down wages as there is more competition for jobs. What it's meant is that now a couple can't afford to live and buy a house unless they're both working. A handful of highflying middle class feminists break through the glass ceiling and become CEOs and media icons. And the rest are welcomed into the world of wage slavery. And then they have to spend their pathetic earnings on childcare because there's no one at home to look after their children.

'There's no left left. Not in politics, not in media, not in universities, not in art. There's the noisy chattering classes espousing feminism and homosexuality and transgenderism and diversity but they're not left, they're all middle class liberals, and the origin of liberals was in free trade. When they say freedom they don't mean freedom, they mean free market, free trade, free movement of labour. It's all about maximising profit for speculators and investors and the handful of manufacturers left. All the carry on about asylum seekers and immigration and gender issues has no connection with the basics of leftist thought, like distribution of wealth, fair wages, public ownership.

'Climate change,' Redman continued, 'That's another mystification. Of course it changes. Hotter or colder all the time. There's no static state in nature. A static state means death. The man-made global warming hysteria about coal power is the product of lobbyists for atomic energy. And the point of atomic energy is the by-product you need for nuclear weapons.'

'You've got a chapter on that?'

'Of course. Post-modernism, that's another nonsense. You see all the rabid right going on about post-modernism being a Marxist plot by the universities to destroy our culture. Sure it's destroying our culture but its intention was to destroy Marxism. Reject socialist realism, introduce the playful irrelevance of post-modern games. Make the traditional culture seem old fashioned and out of date. Avoid teaching the boring old literary texts of our cultural heritage, they take too long to read, replace them by so-called theory, that way the students end up not

having read any of the great works of the past, not having read anything of value, so they know nothing. Perfect. That's why it's taken over the universities and the dominant culture, it's part of their organized destruction. The obliteration of history so that there is no record of any alternatives to the way things are now. Cash values only. Now that the inherited culture has been trashed the corporatized universities can get on with the business of ripping off foreign students who comprise half or more of the student enrolment. Dumbing down courses. Failing nobody, even when they can't write English. All part of the immigration racket. Come in on a student visa, work full time below the basic wage, and apply for citizenship. Forget the citizens already here, forget providing them with a true education, forget preserving and enhancing the national culture. Forget it.'

'How did you write it? 'Plant asked. 'Did you publish it as separate articles and then collect them?'

'No. I didn't want to alert anyone to what I was doing. I didn't publish any of it separately. I kept it all for the book. And look what happens.'

'What about your web-site?'

'I don't have a web-site.'

'Not a blog?'

'Of course not. Why?'

Didn't all aspiring young journalists and writers have a blog? Didn't they all attempt to reach a public via the internet? Hadn't they all moved on beyond print and paper?

'It seems like the sort of material that you might find on the internet,' Plant said.

'Sure. And then the internet finds you. I didn't want to be monitored and targeted. I kept the whole book quiet till I'd finished it.'

'Have you thought of putting it on the web now?'

'I'm going nowhere near the fucking web. It's just a surveillance tool.'

That was Fullalove's belief, too. Probably correct.

'What about an e-book?'

'What about an e-book?'

'Did Turner do an e-book edition?'

'I doubt it. Probably not. How would I know?'

Easily, Plant reflected. By asking him. Or asking for it.

‘It could still be done,’ he said. ‘Easy enough with the book formatted.’

‘If it’s easy enough, why hasn’t he done it? He’s deliberately sabotaging me. It’s obvious, isn’t it?’

‘Turner’s sabotaging you? I thought you said it was the security services.’

‘What’s the difference? They tell him what to do and he does it. Obviously. Or doesn’t do it, if they tell him not to.’

‘What about trying to publish the chapters separately?’ Plant asked. ‘The reason you said you didn’t publish them individually before was so that no one would know what you were working on till the book came out. But now they’ve set fire to the book, whoever they are, they presumably know what was in it so there’s no need to keep the contents secret. Offer the chapters round the media. If you got a good response it might inspire Turner to reprint. Or do an e-book.’

‘I already did.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. What do you expect?’

‘What about the internet? *News from the Dark Side* or something.’

‘And nothing, like I said. She turned me down.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she’s a fraud, obviously. There’s nothing alternative about her. Just another illiberal liberal.’

‘Ah!’ Plant said.

‘Is that all you can say?’

‘I think it speaks volumes.’

‘But you’re not going to say anything.’

No, Plant was not going to say anything, not to someone like Redman, just leave it at that, a closed book. Ah!

‘So you’re convinced it’s political,’

‘What else could it be?’ Redman snapped.

‘Well, something personal maybe. What about friends?’

‘Friends!’

‘Or enemies, then?’

‘I don’t have any.’

‘What, no enemies?’

Plant was surprised.

‘Friends,’ Redman said.

Chapter 5

There was no shortage of writers that Paige Turner had published over the years. Plant estimated that he could spend the next six months or more, seeking them out and interviewing them, depending on how long they were willing to talk, of course. Some would talk for ever. But how much of value he would learn from them was questionable, he soon realized. They would talk, but mainly about themselves, their achievements, their hopes, their public recognition, their neglect, their health, their wealth or lack of it, about anything pretty much. Whether he would learn anything of substance about who might have started the fire was far from certain.

But writers were not the only component of the business. As well as writers, there were editors, designers, publishers, booksellers, reviewers, agents and more who were involved at one level or another in the book trade. Of these, agents were increasingly taking a dominant role. More and more, publishers would only consider manuscripts submitted by agents. In determining what got submitted and what got excluded, agents were increasingly controlling the nature of publishing.

Agent Orange was an obvious agent to have a chat to. Jacquie Gold, to give the name on her letterheads and business cards. But Agent Orange was the name she was known by. And she was known to Plant.

Not that that made it any easier to approach her. Foul-mouthed, foul-tempered and unpredictable in her moods, Plant found her daunting. Not exactly terrifying. But heavy duty. Not at all relaxing. But then, none of the agents he knew of was exactly relaxing.

He phoned.

‘You got a moment?’

‘No.’

‘I wanted to speak to you about Geoffry Turner.’

‘Has he died?’

‘No.’

‘What’s he done then?’

‘Nothing. He...’

‘That’d be right. The dynamics of publishing. Do nothing.’

All delivered in her best ‘bored out of my mind with this conversation and will you just get off the phone and go away’ tone of voice.

‘Someone tried to burn him down.’

It grabbed her attention.

‘Really? Good one. Did they succeed?’

‘No.’

‘Pity. Who was the bright spark who did it? ’

‘That’s what I wanted to ask you.’

‘Why would I know?’

‘Well...’

‘You think I did it? That’s rich. You’ve got a nerve, Plant.’

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘Who would I sell my authors to if I went around burning down publishers?’

‘Fair enough.’

‘So who did it?’

‘No idea.’

‘Great. Anyone ever tell you that, Plant? What a great investigator you are? “So who did it?” “No idea.” Brilliant.’

He tried blatant flattery. It occasionally worked.

‘I don’t know the scene like you do. I thought you’d be the person to ask. You’re the most likely person I know who might have a perspective on it.’

‘What’s got you so smarmy all of a sudden?’

It hadn’t worked. He tried throwing himself on her mercy and goodwill, not qualities she was known for.

‘I need help and I thought you...’

‘You thought I could do your job for you.’

‘Something like that,’ he said. He tried to get the confessional tone right. How to sound beaten down and defeated. The sort of chap lying in the gutter that any noble lady riding by on her high horse would reach down to and raise up.

‘You’re like my authors,’ she said. ‘Do you want me to write your book for you while I’m at it?’

‘Would you? Please.’

‘You’re an arsehole, Plant, did you know that?’

‘I’ll try and do better,’ he said. ‘Just give me five minutes of your time.’

‘You’ve had them already.’

‘I can drop by.’

‘No fucking way, thank you,’ she said. ‘I don’t want you nosing around in here.’ And then to his amazement she offered, ‘I’ll see you at the Toxteth in half an hour.’

‘The pub?’

‘The hotel, yes. Isn’t that where you PIs hang out?’

‘Only in fiction. Are we into literary allusions, now?’

‘Genre fiction. Forget literary. I’m in this as a business.’

‘For the money.’

‘What’s wrong with money?’

‘So,’ she said, looking predictably sceptical at the glass of white wine that Plant handed her. She sipped it and pulled a face. But followed it with a hefty swig.

‘So,’ she said again, ‘Paige Turner burns down and you think one of my authors did it. And they’d tell me. And I’d tell you. Is that how it goes?’

‘Assuming it was one of your authors.’

‘If it was they haven’t told me.’

‘Paige Turner didn’t actually burn down.’

‘Now you tell me. I could have been organizing a celebratory wake and now you tell me they’re still standing. Are they still standing? Or are they in a state of imminent collapse?’

‘I thought most publishers were in a state of imminent collapse these days,’ Plant said.

‘Aren’t we the witty one.’

‘I try.’

‘Try harder. So what actually happened?’

‘Someone set fire to a stack of books.’

‘And?’

‘And the sprinkler system was activated.’

‘And you’ve dragged me out here just to tell me that?’

‘It could’ve been serious.’

‘Couldn’t we all.’

‘I thought you might have some ideas. Maybe.’

‘I probably do. About anything in particular?’

‘Like who might want to burn him down.’

‘How would I know? Some dissatisfied author? Someone he turned down? Some ex-wife or discarded mistress or sexually abused secretary? Take your pick.’

‘But there’s no obvious candidate?’

‘Beyond Turner doing it himself for an insurance claim? No idea,’ she said.

‘You reckon he might do that?’

‘He was a publisher.’

‘Was he into any funny business? In financial trouble?’

‘Probably.’

‘But nothing you know of?’

‘Why would I?’

‘I thought you might have some ideas, given your extensive knowledge of the book trade.’

‘Did anyone tell you how unsubtle you are, Plant? You don’t have to lay it on with a trowel. Leave out the “extensive”, lay off the insincerity, and you might get somewhere.’

Plant gave her his best smile.

‘And where would that be?’ he asked. ‘That I might get,’ he added for clarity.

‘There you go again. You need to be more subtle.’

‘You edit your author’s conversations now, as well as their manuscripts?’

‘Only the inept ones.’

‘I can’t believe you have inept authors.’

‘Not for long. Which reminds me, since you come into that category of inept and you don’t even have a manuscript, get on with it, your time’s running out.’

‘To talk to you? Or generally?’

‘What do you want, Plant?’

‘Who would want to set fire to Paige Turner’s? How did you get along with Turner?’

‘He gave me my name,’ she said.

‘What, Jacquie?’

‘Not that fucking name.’

‘What, Gold? He was your father?’

‘No he wasn’t my fucking father, don’t be idiotic.’

‘So what name?’

‘Agent Orange. He’d been in Vietnam and...’

Defoliant, stripping the leaves off trees, and so by analogy, off books. It went through Plant’s head like a dictionary entry, a usage dictionary, lacking etymology or historical context. But he could supply those.

‘Was he in the military there?’

‘I don’t know. Could’ve been. Macho enough.’

He wanted to ask her what she thought of the name. It was not something anyone cared to ask her. Did she appreciate it? Received opinion was that she loved it. Plant had always believed that she had coined it herself. Well, she might have, but from modesty or deviousness attributed it to Turner.

‘What did you think of him?’ he asked.

‘Haven’t you met him?’

‘Of course I have.’

‘So why ask? Classic old school gentleman publisher.’

‘Really?’

‘In a cheap, reproduction version. Plastic replica.’

‘So is he a gentleman?’

‘He’d like to be the gentleman publisher with a conservative establishment sort of list. He’s almost certainly not, of course, but he does a good enough imitation to make everyone think that he might be. But not consistently so. In publishing if there’s a market for it, do it. So his list

doesn't run any consistently conservative line or anything. Or anything really. Bloody shambles in some ways. All over the place. Which is probably how he manages to survive. And at least you know what you're dealing with.'

'A plastic replica.'

'Not some faceless robot, at least. Doesn't mess you around. Says either yes or no. Which is something, given what he is.'

'Which is what?'

'Old school gentleman publisher.'

'Right.'

'Disgusting old sexist pig,' she added.

'What, me or him?' Plant asked in some alarm.

She just smiled.

'I bet you say that about all the old boys,' Plant said.

'Too fucking right I do. Walking dead white males. Not even walking. Stumbling.'

'So you didn't do any business with him?'

'If I didn't do any business with people like him I wouldn't be doing any business at all in this business. Would I?' she added.

'I don't know.'

'Well, think about it.'

'I guess not,' Plant said. He'd think about it later, maybe. In the meantime he needed some clear answers. 'So you did. Do business with him.'

'Not so you'd notice. Half of the stuff he does is buy-ins. Third tier stuff. The multinationals bring in the stuff they've published overseas. A couple of outfits pick up what the multinationals didn't bother with and stuff from outfits without branches here. Turner has a go at what's left. Which isn't much. Not in terms of sales.'

'What about his local publishing?'

'What about it? Not the sort of bottom-feeding stuff I ever want to get involved with.'

'So you don't do much business with him?'

'The odd title over the years. But no. Not my sort of business.'

'And your sort of business...?'

‘Is selling books. Making money for my authors. And for myself,’ she added, in case Plant thought of mentioning it again.

‘Does Turner make money?’

‘Can’t see how. Peanuts, maybe. Maybe the cookbooks sell. But they’re buy-ins.’

‘He hasn’t published any of your authors?’

‘Like I said, one or two over the years, maybe. When no one else would take them. Way back. Before it was obvious there was no point in dealing with small outfits like his.’

‘Why?’

‘Doesn’t sell enough, why else? He doesn’t have the market presence. So he just ends up with the unfashionable outsiders. Which will bring him down. Some people should be left outside. Just because they’re oppositional doesn’t mean they’re right. They’re obviously wrong. Take them on board and you’ll capsize with them.’

‘So what would be a motive to try and burn him down?’

‘No idea. Can’t see why you’d bother, honestly.’

‘Have you ever come across a writer called Adam Redman?’

‘That loony?’

‘You have.’

‘Thinks he’s an investigative journalist but obviously never gets out of the house. Yes, unfortunately. What a wanking waste of time and space he is. Why?’

‘It was his books that were set fire to.’

‘What, Turner went and published him?’

‘Yes.’

‘He really is losing his grip.’

‘Who, Redman or Turner?’

‘Redman never had a grip. Except round his dick. Turner, of course. Why would he publish that insanity? Don’t tell me, don’t tell me, Redman paid for it.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘No other way anyone would touch it. Rabid insanity. Thinks he’s the prophet Jeremiah, or something. Everything that’s wrong with the world and who to blame. Was that the book?’

‘*Illiberal Liberals*.’

‘That’s it. How could I forget?’

‘You’ve read it?’

‘I rejected it. What a nightmare he was. If I ever find out who put him onto me, I’ll kill them. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. Kept hassling. I told him it was unpublishable. No one would touch it. He wouldn’t believe me. Went on and on. So poor old Turner took it. Couldn’t have read it. Probably never looked at it till he got the copies. No wonder he set fire to them.’

‘You think Turner set fire to them?’

‘I would have,’ she said.

She drained the final drops from her glass and plonked it down on the table. Clunk.

‘Gotta go,’ she said, getting up.

‘You want another one?’

‘Some of us work,’ she said.

‘Must be hard,’ Plant commiserated.

‘So,’ she said, standing up and looming over him, ‘poor old Turner, what’s he doing now he’s been burned down?’

‘He wasn’t burned down. Just a few boxes of *Illiberal Liberals*.’

‘Really. Now you tell me. Well, that’s a pity. Better luck next time, hey?’

She was out of the door and vanished into the street while Plant pondered on whether to have another one. Why not? After exposure to Agent Orange, he felt a need for R&R. Rest and recuperation. Or was it rest and recreation? A phrase from the Vietnam war years. The R&R that brought American servicemen and the heroin trade to Australia.

He had another one.

Chapter 6

Since he was in the area Plant headed back down Glebe Point Road to Mac Arber’s Rare and Collectable Books. Arber spelled out in fading gold lettering, with the emblem of a couple of yellowing, green trees each side of the name, up above the window. Seductive exotica in the window. Or what Mac Arber considered seductive and exotic. Bargain tray outside on the pavement. Curiosa and curiosa in the inner recesses of the shop. Plant pushed open the door and the tinkling little bell gave its irritating little tinkle. Why it always irritated him, Plant did not

know. Perhaps it swept him back in time to an era before electronics, before electricity, a world of gas lights and mechanical devices and the mists of late Gothic horror, an era he did not want to be swept back to. And it was not as if he delighted in the electronic. It worried him, his deep antipathy to the little tinkling bell.

But its tinkling was lost immediately beneath Mac Arber's current foray into sensory stimulation. His earlier strategy of filling the atmosphere with incense had ceased after customers claimed allergic reactions. 'I could see them organizing a class action against me,' he said. So incense had been replaced by the introduction of music with literary associations. The works of the great that had been inspired by the written word resonated through the shop. And the books that contained the inspirational written words were positioned there on the counter by the cash register so that any subliminal yearnings to acquire the inspirational literary text could immediately be fulfilled by buying it. The text. Like the way chemists and supermarkets stocked chocolate and other sugary confections at the checkout. For a last minute indulgent purchase. Today it was the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon, Janet Baker booming out Edward Elgar's setting of 'The Swimmer' at full volume.

'I would ride as never man has ridden,

'In your sleepy swirling surges hidden,

'The gulfs foreshadowed through straits forbidden,

'Where no light wearies and no love wanes.'

'Paige Turner?' Mac said. 'A traditional gentleman publisher of the old school.'

'That's what Agent Orange said.'

'Is that so? But from her that would have been a bit of routine character assassination. Whereas from me it was modest praise.'

'Only modest?'

'After a lifetime in this business I'm not going to go round heaping excessive praises on a publisher. Or on a gentleman for that matter. Not that he was one.'

'Isn't he?'

'I shouldn't think so. Not for a moment. Though he's got a nice taste in cravats.'

'You're saying he's a jumped up working class counterfeit.'

'I wasn't thinking in class terms, Plant, don't get all outraged. I was merely questioning whether a publisher could ever be a gentleman. And still stay in business.'

‘You’re saying he’s crooked, then.’

‘Not at all. I don’t know what he is. I’m just suggesting that the image he presents may not be totally, how shall I put it, authentic.’

‘What image is?’ Plant asked.

‘I’m sure I could think of some.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s Turner I’m interested in.’

‘I’ve always thought he was rather good value. But the Agent Oranges of our world hate him with a vengeance.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because he’s independent. He runs his own show and makes his own decisions. In which he takes great delight. It’s what publishers always used to be. Independent mavericks. So agents can’t stand him because he’s not interested in the commercial garbage they’re peddling, all the dreadful packaged junk designed for the multinationals to pump out. He prefers real books by real people.’

He shook his head sadly, briefly, but soon perked up.

‘So come clean now, what’s all this about? Are you hot on his trail for something deliciously wicked?’

‘He’s hired me.’

‘How exciting. But that doesn’t answer the question.’

‘Someone tried to burn him down.’

‘And since he’s a publisher you naturally think he might have organized it himself.’

‘It’s always possible,’ Plant agreed, ‘but no, I don’t think that. But I’m interested in what people make of him, who would want to set fire to his books.’

‘Did they succeed? Do his titles suddenly have scarcity value?’

‘No, they didn’t succeed.’

‘Now you tell me. After letting me get my hopes up that I might be sitting on some irreplaceable stock. What a horrible tease you can be, Plant. So tell me, what happened?’

‘Someone set fire to a stack of *Illiberal Liberals*.’

‘I take it that’s the title of a book. Rather than a roomful of bossy media types.’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah, well.’

‘The author’s called Adam Redman.’

Mac Arber tickled a few keys on his computer.

‘I don’t have anything by him in stock. Is that all he’s written? Should I look out for copies or did they all go up in smoke?’

‘They got water-damaged.’

‘Just them? Any others?’

‘Just them.’

‘Who would have done it? The author’s ex, maybe? A rival political pundit?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘It clearly isn’t.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I suggested Turner did it himself and you roundly dismissed that.’

‘I didn’t dismiss it “roundly”, whatever that means, or any other way.’

‘You know what it means and yes, you did dismiss it.’

‘He might have done it himself, sure, but I don’t think he did as it happens. Why would he hire me to find out who did it if he did it?’

‘Cover. Dissimulation.’

‘That’s what Fullalove said.’

‘I imagine that’s what Fullalove always says.’

‘Doesn’t mean it’s not true.’

‘Except that you don’t believe it.’

‘No, not in this case, I don’t. I don’t think so, anyway.’

‘Ah, the satisfactions of indecision,’ Mac Arber said. ‘You should come in here and help stock the shelves some time. Is this fiction or memoir? Is this better in history or biography? Is this literary fiction or classic crime? You’d be in your element. The indeterminacy principle writ large and without end.’

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said. ‘Why would you think Turner did it? Don’t you like him, or something?’

‘No, I like him well enough. Genial old buffer. Most of the time. Can’t say I can make much sense of his list. Not exactly the *crême de la crême* as far as collectors are concerned. All over the place. No clear aesthetic. Opportunistic, I think you’d call it.’

‘And that’s not a good thing?’

‘Not for collectors. They like consistency.’

‘What if Turner’s opportunism is seen as consistency? Consistently opportunistic?’

‘Nice try. But it doesn’t work like that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh Plant, why, why, why is anything the way it is? It just doesn’t appeal.’

‘Does any of it sell, do you reckon?’

‘Does anything?’ Mac Arber asked, despairingly, spreading his arms wide, indicating his shop, and beyond.

‘Times are tough, then?’

‘Always.’

‘But he survives,’ Plant said. Or asked.

‘Seems to.’

‘But nothing springs to mind.’

‘Any top-selling author on his list, you mean? Doubt it. He probably does all right on his cookbooks. Not really my kind of thing so I can’t say for certain. But they could be what keeps him afloat.’

‘Not books on illiberal liberals.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so. Not round here, anyway.’

Chapter 7

Most of the authors on the Paige Turner website were unknown to Plant. He might have glimpsed their names once in a while in the books pages, but he had neither encountered nor heard of most of them. Ted Kelly was one he had met before, so it was Ted Kelly that he called on.

Kelly at one time or another had been a rock journalist, a poet, a novelist, an editor, a song writer and a few other things as well. He came to the door in a cloud of coffee and marijuana fumes, kimono clad, bare-legged and bare-footed.

‘Not too early, is it?’ Plant asked.

He'd left it till a decent hour, eleven thirty, going on noon.

Kelly beamed a happy smile and assured him that it wasn't.

'I've got all day,' he said. 'And tomorrow.'

'Not busy, then?'

'At what? What could there be to keep me busy? You got a suggestion? Come, who will buy my deathless prose? Sing a song for sixpence. And now sixpenny pieces are no longer legal currency, what is left? Sing a song for bugger all and get fined for being an acoustic nuisance.'

'Have you been fined?'

'No, neither paid nor fined. But there's always a first time. And then the next and the next and the next.'

'I need some background information,' Plant said.

'Yeah, you said.'

'You did a book with Paige Turner...'

'That crook,' Kelly cut across him. 'Yeah, years ago. What a farce that was.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing happened. No sales, no reviews, no money, no nothing. Why?'

'They've had a fire. Someone set fire to them.'

'Wasn't me, mate.'

'I wasn't suggesting it was.'

'Why not? I had every reason to. I could've. Should've, maybe. Did they do a lot of damage? Here's hoping.'

'No, just a stack of books got burned.'

'Turner would've done it himself. Insurance claim.'

'You think?'

'He's the obvious person.'

'You said you could have.'

'But I didn't do it.'

'Then why did you say it?'

'Just a manner of speaking.'

'Go on.'

'Just a poor author's reaction to a shonky publisher.'

‘Just your reaction? Or do his other authors feel the same way, maybe?’

‘They ought to. The man’s a monster. Should’ve set fire to him, not just his books. Did the place burn down?’

‘No, the fire was in the warehouse and the sprinklers came on and put it out.’

‘Warehouse,’ Kelly said. ‘That bloody place. I’ve been there. I can tell you a story about that.’

He had resolved on direct action. The phrase resonated from the years of political protest and confrontation. Not that he’d ever been much of an activist. More the contemplative type. Life, be out of it. But the time had come to refuse the treatment publishers meted out. Or failed to mete out. Like failing to pay royalties.

‘You know where his place is?’ Kelly asked.

‘Yes.’

‘So I drove down there. Talk about mean streets. So I get there and the place is wide open, the roller door up, so since there’s no parking in the street, of course, I drive in. Get out of the car. And there’s these boxes of books against the wall. Totally unprotected. Anyone could’ve walked in off the street and stolen a box. So I walk over and take a look. Check out the labels. And there I am. Kelly. That’s me. That’s my book. The one I haven’t been paid any royalties for, not a brass razoo.

‘That’s when I thought, what the hell. I go back to the car, open the boot, take a couple of boxes across and whack them in, and close it. I mean, the place was wide open, anyone could’ve stolen them at any time. Probably what Turner had in mind. Save paying some waste disposal firm to pick them up for pulping. Save trying to sell them.

‘Then I go up to the office and Turner’s there, sitting in his fancy swivel chair with his feet on the desk, reading a newspaper, and this excuse for a secretary is sprawled on the carpet, long bloody legs all over the place, sucking the end of a pen, cheque book at the ready. This is back when people still used cheque books, right? And she’s making out cheques for five bucks at a time, post-dated week after week ahead.

‘Seemed like a sign.

‘“Paying your authors at last,” I said.

‘“Authors, forget it,” he said. “This is business. How do you think I stay alive to publish you blokes?”

‘“By selling books?” I say.

‘“Books,” he says, “books? No one wants books. Books are a charity case.”

‘“I’m not,” I say.

‘“You’re not what?”

‘“A charity case,” I said, “I need to be paid.”

‘“Oh Kelly, Kelly, old chap,” he goes, “we all need to be paid. And in a just world we all would be.”

‘“What about my royalties?” I say.

‘“Royalties, royalties, surely we’re all republicans now. Are there any royalties, sweetie?” he asks his secretary creature.

‘“Not really,” she says, all sweetness and stocking clad legs slithering all over the carpet.

‘“Good girl,” he says. “See, no royalties. Times are tough. Nothing sells.”

‘“I sell,” I said.

‘“Of course, of course,” he says. “But not enough.”

‘“So pay me for the ones that have been sold,” I say.

‘“Of course, of course, I will. But you’ve read the contract. You know the terms. As soon as sales reach a certain amount, you’ll be paid. Never fear.”

‘“What amount?”

‘“How should I know? You’ve got the contract. I can’t keep everyone’s contract in my head. Think how many authors I have.”

‘“And do any get paid?”

‘“Not really,” the secretary pipes up.

‘“Of course they do,” he says, leaning over to whack her across the ear with the newspaper but she ducks and he misses. “When they reach break-even point.”

‘“And what’s break-even point? How many copies is that?”

‘“Every book is different,” he goes, “each one is unique, individual, different length, different print run, different binding, different development costs.”

‘“What development costs?” I say.

‘“Maybe not in your case, but different authors work in different ways.”

‘“Yes, sure,” I say, “but what about my royalties?”

‘“I tell you what,” he says. “Come downstairs with me and I’ll fix you up. I’ll give you a couple of boxes of your book. Gratis. Absolutely free. As a measure of goodwill. You can splash them around as promotional copies and Christmas presents. How about that? I can’t offer fairer than that.”

‘And he hustles me out of the office and down the stairs and says, “Open your boot and I’ll help you put them in.”’

Kelly paused, took a sip of his coffee, fixed his attention on Plant.

‘So what happened then?’ Plant asked.

‘I said the boot wouldn’t open. Turner shakes his head, looks at my car with undisguised contempt, poor old battered thing whose boot won’t open.

‘“Put them on the back seat,” I say, and I wait till he comes round the side, well away from the boot, and I open the passenger door and push the front seat forward and we put a couple of boxes on the back seat.’

‘And?’ Plant asked.

‘That was it.’

‘Just two boxes.’

‘Yes.’

‘Lucky he didn’t try opening the boot to fit another one in.’

‘There was room on the seat. And on the front passenger seat.’

‘But he didn’t offer to put another one in.’

‘No.’

‘So a couple of boxes was it. Not just a figure of speech.’

‘There are no figures of speech with Turner. He’s strictly a numbers man.’

‘So you ended up with four boxes of books altogether.’

‘I guess so. Might have been five, I might have put another one in.’

‘Not a bad haul. All free.’

‘Yeah, but...’

‘You could flog them. Give them out for promotion.’

‘Yeah, but who would want them?’

Which was no doubt what Turner thought, Plant reflected. One of those reflections he kept to himself. Why were authors always so ungrateful? he wondered. As for publishers...

‘If he’s a numbers man he probably knew you’d already pinched some boxes when he looked at the stack.’

‘Could’ve. Could’ve been watching me on CCTV from the beginning and just decided to wind me up, I thought later. It’s the sort of thing he’d do.’

‘Is it?’

Any clue as to Turner’s behaviour to authors could be useful.

‘Nothing would surprise me.’

‘Maybe you were lucky,’ Plant said. ‘His CCTV doesn’t work.’

‘Since when?’

‘I don’t know since when, but it wasn’t working when they had the fire.’

‘How do you?’

‘Turner told me.’

‘And you believed him?’ Kelly asked.

‘I guess I did,’ Plant said. And now he had something else to wonder about.

‘Why did you publish with Turner if you think he’s a crook?’

‘I didn’t know he was at the time. He was the last one left on the list. I’d been turned down by everyone else.’

‘Really?’

‘Pretty much. Anyway, I thought he’d be a cool guy. I met him when he was working for the Brits. Then I bumped into him again in Asia.’

‘Asia?’

‘Yeah, India. Bangkok one time.’

‘What was he doing in Asia?’

‘What were any of us doing in Asia?’ Kelly asked.

Plant waited for clarification.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘Take your pick.’

‘Publishing?’

‘Wouldn’t think so.’

‘What then?’

‘Getting stoned. Getting laid. What else would he be doing in Asia? He’d probably like you to think it was sex. Always a bit of the macho man about him. But more likely it was drugs. Or doing the secret state some service.’

‘Really?’

‘Why not? You sound surprised.’

‘He doesn’t look the type.’

‘For what?’

‘Getting stoned for a start.’

‘That’s how you can tell them half the time.’

‘How?’

‘If they look straight, they’re probably dealers. The DEA types always look like users. Probably are. But he could have been either. Or both.’

‘Really?’

‘I’ve no idea, honestly. Sounds good, though. Could be sex tourism. But it’s harder to tell that type just by looking at them.’

‘You knew him in Asia, though.’

‘Can’t say I really knew him. More kind of bumped into him now and then.’

‘Where?’

‘Where?’

‘Yes, where did you bump into him? Buying dope?’

‘You try not to bump into anyone when you’re buying dope.’

‘But that sort of world.’

‘Sure. No “sort of” about it.’

‘So was he using or was he dealing?’

‘No idea, to be honest. Just, you run across people in that scene, you’ve got to wonder. Buying it, smoking it, eating it, dealing it, that was the scene. Could be doing all that and reporting back to some agency at the same time. What he was doing there precisely, who knows? Could’ve been setting up a publishing company for all I know. Though I doubt it. But it was that sort of scene, you know, a few would-be writers, journalists like Liz Lambastier and Ghostly Sperrit, publishers like Turner.’

‘All Australians?’

‘No, not at all, all sorts. Publishers trying to go global and set up subsidiaries. Starr, that American operator. Bentley, one of Turner’s British mates, buying up rights and researching one of his spy novels. And somehow you wind up hanging out in the same sort of places, like-minded people sort of thing, where people like that hang out. I mean you still hang out in other places, along with Scandinavian hippies or local gurus, or with just yourself and a supply of ganja, but even though you’re overseas and out of this world, you still end up bumping into the sort of people you’ve always hung out with or heard of. Even if you haven’t met them before, you’ve heard of them.’

‘And when was all this?’

‘Oh, man, æons ago. Absolutely æons ago. All a bit blurred, now. All a bit blurred at the time, for that matter.’

Chapter 8

Blokey O’Kee had nothing but positive things to offer.

‘Paige Turner? Splendid outfit.’

‘No complaints?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Sales? Promotion? Marketing?’

‘First class operation.’

‘Not too small?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Compared with one of the multinationals. Do they have the market presence? A big enough sales force?’

‘Not a problem,’ Blokey said. ‘It’s a personal operation. You’re dealing with real people. A real team. Not just chucked onto an assembly line with a row of robots.’

‘So you don’t ever regret leaving the big boys?’

Blokey gave one of his filthy looks. When it came to sales figures, everyone regretted leaving the big boys, personal service or not. But no one was ever going to admit it. Certainly not Blokey.

‘Or big girls,’ Plant added, for gender balance.

He was tempted to push further and ask what O’Kee’s current sales were like. Think of a number and double it. But Blokey’s assertiveness warned him off. Such positive endorsement of a publisher from a writer rang false. He could probably find out Blokey’s sales directly from Turner. And find that Blokey’s enthusiasm was inflated beyond reality, that his sales were slender and best kept silent about. And to delve down further might reveal a burning desire to torch Paige Turner’s for their failure to deliver Blokey the readership and royalties he had no doubt that he deserved. Well, possibly. Plant rather doubted that Blokey would ever get round to doing anything about his problems, whether by burning down his publisher or by trying to write better books.

‘Don’t you think?’ Blokey asked. Demanded, even.

Plant tried to tune back in to whatever Blokey was saying.

‘Think about what? Sorry, I missed that. Plane flying overhead.’

Blokey gave one of his sour expressions. Bad enough people not reading your books without their not listening to you either.

‘Why are you asking me all these questions, anyway?’

Plant wasn’t sure that he’d asked that many questions. Was Blokey showing signs of anxiety? Was there something he was concealing? Or was he always like that?

‘Just trying to get a sense of Paige Turner’s and their authors.’

‘You think one of their authors started the fire? A bit unlikely, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said. And he didn’t.

‘How many authors do you know who’d go and do a thing like that?’

Plant looked across at Blokey, assessing the likelihood of his striking matches and kindling flames.

‘Ridiculous,’ Blokey said.

But not impossible.

‘Still,’ said Blokey, inspiration alighting and sparking up his mood, suggesting possibilities. ‘Did I ever give you a copy of my *Chronicles*? It might give you some ideas. Have a browse. You can get a good sense of what certain people are capable of from their table talk and that sort of thing. I’ve been keeping a record for years. Writing it up afterwards. Could give you a clue.’

‘Yes, you did indeed,’ Plant said. But Blokey had already left the room, vanished into his vault of remaindered works. He came back with a pristine copy of the *Chronicles* which he thrust upon Plant. There was no point now in Plant’s saying he already one which Blokey had given to him the last time they’d met. It would sound ungrateful, even rude, offensive. He accepted it graciously. Maybe he could pass it onto Fullalove. Or if it wasn’t likely to qualify for any of Fullalove’s categories of subversive books you wouldn’t want anyone to know you were reading, then he could just surreptitiously drop it into the bargain tray in front of the window of Mac Arber’s shop.

There were no poetry books on Paige Turner’s List. That didn’t mean that poets were not involved in the fire. The very absence of a poetry list might have provoked one of the poets to make reprisals. Plant dug out his old, battered address book and opened it at P. P for poets and professors. He dialled the number for the poet professor Prickett.

The poet professor Prickett was forthcoming as ever.

‘How can he call himself a publisher and refuse to publish poetry? He’s no different from the multinationals. Equally, irresponsibly, criminally, philistine. The man’s a barbarian. He deserves to be burned down.’

‘And do other poets feel this strongly?’

‘One would hope so.’

‘And they might have started the fire?’

‘It would be nice to think so,’ Prickett said.

Plant pictured him gazing abstractedly into poetic realms. Or maybe into empty space.

‘But?’

‘Well, if they did, I wouldn’t want to incriminate them.’

‘But you can think of likely names.’

‘Not really.’

‘No?’

‘Not at all, actually.’

‘There’s no one you can think of who might have done it?’

‘No. It’s never happened before, not that I’ve ever heard of. I mean, if it had happened before, it might have prompted someone to do it again, like a poetic tradition, you know. But I don’t think it has. Happened before. Not that I’ve ever read.’

‘And you’re saying that if it hasn’t happened before, no poet would think of doing it for the first time.’

‘Probably not. No.’

‘Though they might have.’

‘As I said, it would be nice to think so. Not that I’d say myself, of course, that he deserved to be burned down, not at all. But nonetheless I can understand how some excitable young poets might think that he should be. Deserved to be. But I’m not suggesting that they would have done it.’

‘But you didn’t feel any impetus to do it yourself.’

‘Pretty busy at the moment, what with the new book and everything.’

It was hardly a straightforward denial. More a poetic evasion. That was the nature of poets, Plant had found. No point in asking them anything if you wanted a straight answer.

Chapter 9

Fullalove dismissed Plant’s findings on Blokey O’Kee and the poet Prickett. They didn’t rate as likely incendiaries in his analysis. But Kelly was someone he found potentially much more interesting.

‘So Kelly came across Turner on his travels on the old hippy trial,’ Fullalove said.

‘Apparently.’

‘So sex, spookery or substance abuse.’

Plant looked across the kitchen table at Fullalove rolling a joint. A jumbo one for shared purposes.

‘Since when did you start calling it substance abuse?’

‘All about the alliteration,’ Fullalove said.

‘You’re practicing to be a poet?’

‘Can’t leave it all to the poor old Pricketts of this world. Gotta give it a go. Why not?’

‘Why?’

‘Why wouldn’t one?’

‘And is there any substance to your speculations? Are they speculations or...?’

Plant scoured around for an s word without success.

‘Sad songs at sunset,’ Fullalove offered. ‘Or sunrise, for that matter.’

‘You think Turner was into dope?’

‘Why not? Everyone else was. Many still are.’

He shuffled the newspapers and magazines and books around on the table until he found a box of matches. Traditional. Since 1946. Classic Redheads. His was not a world of gold lighters, or even plastic ones. He took out a match, struck it on the side of the box, and lit the joint. He sucked on it deeply and passed it across, the shared sacrament, all saliva and smoke. Better than sticks and seeds, nonetheless.

‘What about spookery?’

‘A more select few,’ Fullalove offered. ‘But he fits the bill. Agents of influence. Publishers. Perfect cover. Businessmen. Forget writers and journalists, they’re too obvious.’

‘And you’re saying that Turner...?’

‘Have a think about it.’

Plant had a thought about it.

‘Go on,’ he said. ‘What spookery would he have been up to in India? Or Thailand?’ he asked sceptically.

‘Running drugs to finance off-the-books secret service operations.’

‘Off the books,’ Plant said. ‘And he’s a publisher. Neat.’

Fullalove smiled. ‘How about wet jobs, then?’ he offered, with as far as Plant was concerned unnecessary relish. ‘Phoney terrorist incidents. Targeted assassinations. Honey-pot entrapments.’

‘All the lurid fantasies of spy fiction.’

‘You bet,’ Fullalove agreed enthusiastically. ‘And the rest.’

Plant remained sceptical. He had to, it was the nature of his business. Fullalove had no such inhibitions.

‘So you’re saying that Turner’s...?’

‘Yes,’ Fullalove agreed before Plant could even finish.

‘But there’s absolutely no evidence. If he’s dodgy why does he risk asking me to nose around? If he wants to find out who started the fire, I’m going to have to look into his business and his contacts and his dealings, whatever they might or might not be.’

‘He probably doesn’t even consider he’s dodgy. One man’s dodginess is another man’s...’

He tailed off.

‘Another man’s what?’

‘Service to the state, maybe.’

‘Oh no, you’re not going to say he’s secretly subsidized by the state?’

‘Why not? Like the way the CIA funded all those publishers and magazines through the Congress for Cultural Freedom. It worked before so why not do it again? No reason to believe it’s not still happening. They’re all compromised one way or another. Literature board subsidies. Academy subsidies. University publishing grants. Philanthropic foundations.’

‘I don’t see that literature board subsidies are dodgy.’

‘Of course you do. You know how they go to the undeserving.’

‘Writers’ grants.’

‘Exac’ly. And publishing subsidies.’

‘All the publishers get them.’

‘Sure. Total dodginess. Wall to wall dodginess. The way the state supports its loyal propagandists and suppresses its critics. Why else offer subsidies? That’s how the system works. You know that. It doesn’t have to be a bunch of complicit board members consciously excluding the critical and the subversive and true. Once you set up a reward system like grants and prizes and honours, you’ve ensured that you’ve got your compliant, conformist celebrants of the status quo. They’ll all self-censor themselves into uniform conformity. No more 1930s leftists, no more 1950s leftists, no more 1960s leftists, no more McCarthyite witch hunts, the literati have already purged themselves of any untoward thoughts in order to get grants and awards and the Order of Australia.’

‘And how does this relate to Turner?’

‘Well, if he wants publishing subsidies that’s the stuff he’ll be publishing. So he won’t want to upset the book cart by publishing radical, challenging stuff.’

‘Won’t he?’

‘Does he?’

Plant shrugged.

‘Well, to be fair, does anybody any more?’ Fullalove conceded. ‘They’ve all run scared. Or gone out of business.’

‘Isn’t that a little extreme?’

‘Is it?’

‘Are you saying that no one ever publishes anything against the system? No one ever publishes anything really radical any more? What about Redman’s book?’

‘Well, it wouldn’t have got a subsidy. Unless Redman funded it himself. But fair enough. Maybe, yes, once in a while they might. Make a stand. Take a risk.’

‘And what happens then?’ Plant asked.

‘They get burnt down.’

‘It’s a bit old fashioned, isn’t it?’

‘What is?’

‘Burning books. The security services would be far more high tech than that, surely. They’d hack into Turner’s computers, put in a virus, wipe the files of Redman’s book, do it all remotely, no risk of being seen on CCTV lighting matches.’

‘And that mightn’t seem a bit obvious?’ Fullalove asked. ‘Who else would have the capacity to do that?’

‘A rival publisher? A discontented author? A fourteen year old hacker?’

‘Really?’

‘Why not?’

‘It would stick out like dogs’ balls that it was a security services job. No, they’re too smart for that. They’d want it to look ambiguous at the least. Start a fire. Anyone might have done it. No obvious finger of suspicion.’

‘Maybe,’ Plant conceded.

‘But?’

‘But I don’t see it. Why would they bother? Was Redman’s book really going to...?’

‘Set the world on fire?’ Fullalove suggested.

‘It’s not, is it?’ Plant said. ‘I’ve had a look through it and basically I’ve heard it all before. Most of it. And most of it from you.’

‘Me?’ Fullalove said. He looked up with a happy smile. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, you. Master of conspiracy theory. Banging on year after year. Some of it I’ve read elsewhere. And the rest of it I’d figured out for myself. So, it’s true enough, it’s all pretty persuasive. But it’s not like it’s all unknown. It is known. It just goes unregistered. Bits get in the media but they don’t get followed up.’

‘Of course not,’ Fullalove said. ‘That’s the point of the media.’

‘So why torch Redman’s book when it probably wouldn’t get any notice anyway? Why draw attention to it?’

‘Good point.’

‘So?’

Fullalove wriggled a little finger in his ear vigorously.

‘Good point,’ he said again. ‘Maybe he set fire to them himself, then. Redman. To try and look like the book was hot stuff.’ He laughed. ‘Hoping to get some media coverage that way since no one was ever going to review it. Fake up some security angle. Or Turner could’ve done it for the same reason.’

It was not something that Plant had considered. But now that Fullalove had suggested it, there it was. A provoking possibility. Don’t get too inventive, Plant tried to tell himself. Don’t let the thrill of the chase make you too creative. Never overlook the obvious. And the obviously unavoidably blindingly obvious was that Redman could well have done it himself. And stuffed it up, not even starting a decent fire before the sprinklers came on. Having met Redman, and heard him, at some length, then it was a possibility that could not be discounted. The man was mad enough, in a rather ordinary sort of manifestation. And it wasn’t something that required any great degree of madness to achieve, striking a few matches and setting fire to a few books in an incompetent way. Just your average, blundering, obsessive author, not even certifiably clinically mad, maybe.

Chapter 10

Plant headed across to Paige Turner’s through the inner-city streets. The usual pollution from traffic fumes had been augmented with the smoke from bushfires surrounding the city, draping everything in a light blue haze. The roller door of the Paige Turner building was open and the

space inside vacant, no Range Rover occupying it. Plant drove in and parked his Hyundai close to the boxes along the wall so that if someone else arrived there would be room for them. The burned and sodden boxes of *Illiberal Liberals* had been removed, leaving nothing but some murky stains on the floor that might have been water-saturated ash. Nothing else, anyway.

He climbed up the iron stairs, his steps generating a metallic echo in the empty space. He pressed the buzzer beside the door at the top. A voice called 'Come in' and the lock was released and he entered the office. Chloe. There was no one else there. Just her.

She looked up at him as he came in. Not exactly apprehensive. But wary at the least.

He tried his genial manner.

'What, all alone?'

'Yes,' she agreed.

'Are they all off sick?'

'They're part-time,' she said. 'They don't come in today.'

'What about the boss? He's not part-time too, is he?'

It was meant as a joke. Not a very good one, more the sort of not especially funny remark that tended to annoy people.

'Of course not,' she said. 'He's down at the farm.'

'The farm?'

'Yes.'

'What does he grow?'

'I don't know that he grows anything. He warehouses the stock there that we can't fit in downstairs. And it's just somewhere he likes to get away to.'

'Sounds like a good idea,' he said, aiming for a more genial, conciliatory approach. Leave the jokes alone.

She didn't offer agreement. Nor did she disagree. She sat at her desk looking across at him. Slim, thin indeed, she was not without a slender, redheaded charm, fragile wrists that hardly looked strong enough to have pounded the keys in the old, manual typewriter days.

'I parked downstairs,' he said. 'The door was open.'

She nodded.

'You're not worried leaving it open like that?'

'No.'

‘Not expecting another arson attempt.’

‘It happened at night,’ she said.

She seemed calmly unconcerned about the risk of a further attack on the office or of its being burned down around her. Which given what seemed like her somewhat anxious personality, Plant found somewhat surprising. Maybe he had got it wrong and she wasn’t basically anxious, not at all anxious. Just naturally thin. How could you tell? But those bird-like flutterings, that alert pecking at things, at the desk, the keyboard, the phone, and the 180 degree vision keeping check on the world above and around and behind, all suggested a degree of wariness. But not fear.

‘So the boss isn’t around.’

‘No, he left, he won’t be back today,’ she said.

‘No problem. Just a few questions. Maybe you can answer them for me.’

‘Me?’

There’s no one else here, he could have said. But didn’t.

‘If that’s all right,’ he offered.

‘What sort of questions?’

She didn’t concede that it would be all right. Nor did it matter. He was going to ask them anyway.

‘Do you know Adam Redman?’ he asked.

‘Know him? Of course. He’s one of our authors.’

Of course he was one of their authors, that’s why his books were in the warehouse, the ones that got set fire to.

‘Did you ever encounter him?’

She looked across at Plant, holding a ballpoint pen in both hands, held out in front of her like a notional if insubstantial barrier.

‘Encounter?’ she repeated. ‘He came in once or twice, I suppose. Mainly he’d phone. Like most of our authors.’

‘But he came in to pick up his author’s copies.’

She looked startled.

‘Well, yes. How did you know that?’

‘He told me. He said you phoned him.’

She blinked.

‘Well, yes. We always let our authors know when copies of their books have arrived.’

‘You don’t just mail them out?’

‘No. No, not at all. The idea is for them to come in here and pick them up. That way when they see them in the office, hopefully they’ll be tempted to buy more. That way we move more copies.’

‘Cunning strategy.’

‘They get a good discount,’ she said, defensively.

‘And you save on postage costs.’

‘We mail them out if the author asks us to,’ she said.

‘But Redman didn’t buy more?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know. Probably because he doesn’t have the money. I’ve no idea.’

‘So you didn’t really know him.’

‘I’ve met him a few times,’ she said.

She sounded distant, remote, uninvolved or evasive.

‘What did you make of him?’

‘Make of him?’ she repeated. As if she had been asked to cut him up and recycle him and turn him into a stuffed toy or something. Plant waited.

‘He’s pleasant enough.’

‘Enough?’

‘Well, pleasant. He can get a bit intense. But basically, yes, he’s fine.’

‘Not one of your typical troublesome authors?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘Even if his topic was and his books got burned.’

‘I don’t think it was a matter of being troublesome. It was what he believed. He felt it had to be said.’

‘And did you?’

‘Me?’

‘What did you think about it? Do you think it had to be said?’

She looked puzzled.

‘It wasn’t really my business.’

‘You didn’t think the book was going to cause trouble?’

‘It wasn’t for me to say.’

‘But did you?’

‘Did I what?’

‘Think it was trouble.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘But you didn’t expect someone to set fire to it.’

‘Obviously not.’

‘Obviously?’

‘It’s never happened before.’

‘Has Paige Turner published controversial books before?’

‘It depends what you mean by controversial.’

‘Has there been trouble?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t think so. Not that I’ve heard of. But I don’t know.’

Outside in the smoke haze there was the rumble of traffic, the dulled roar of the city. Inside there was nothing but the soft susurrus of the air-conditioning, no recorded music, no radio, no television, no ticking clock, no ringing phone, no printer or photocopier working away.

‘Have you thought about who might have done it? Started the fire?’

‘Of course I’ve thought about it,’ she said.

‘And?’

‘And nothing. I don’t have any idea.’

‘And Adam Redman? Does he have any ideas?’

‘How would I know?’

‘You’ve not spoken to him about it?’

‘Not really.’

Plant waited. Silent and smiling. His enigmatic number.

‘But he’s mentioned it, surely.’

‘I imagine he thinks it’s political.’

‘Imagine?’

‘Assume, then. That’s what he thinks about most things.’

‘So he does have some ideas.’

She shook her head.

‘Nothing specific.’

‘But political.’

She nodded.

‘When was this?’

‘When was what?’

‘That he said it was political.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. The other day.’

‘Where?’

‘Where? On the phone, probably. Why?’

‘Just wondering,’ Plant said.

‘Wondering what?’

‘If you’d had a chance to talk to him about it.’

‘Not really.’

‘Or anyone else.’

She shook her head. Like a bird shaking a lizard to break its neck.

‘I’d better get on with this,’ she said, gesturing at the computer.

Plant left her to get on with it.

Chapter 11

Plant called in at *News from the Dark Side*. It was probably bad form to call in at the office of an on-line operation. Physically. Actually. The world of the web preferred the virtual, the remote. Probably. So he assumed. But Plant still preferred face to face encounters. Not precisely confrontation, though it could come to that. Especially with Angela Dark. The Mighty Anarch as she had come to be. Certainly as Plant had come to think of her.

News from the Dark Side had its office in one of the areas of urban renewal, just about inner-city, old warehouses and clothing factories and occasional rows of terraces now mutated

into art galleries and cafes and internet operations. A narrow anonymous doorway led down the entrance corridor. He negotiated his way past the bicycles to a lift with a list of occupants beside it. He pressed the button for *News from the Dark Side* and took the lift up to reception. A glass door announced it. Reception. Plant peered through the glass. There was no one in sight. Just a couple of unoccupied black plastic and metal office chairs and a black metal desk with a black computer and printer and other black metal or plastic things. Finally, the triumph of the internet, the digital news service without human agency. Nothing but algorithms and robots and drones.

He pressed the buzzer at the side of the door. No one came. He pressed it again, two short bursts and a longer one. A further delay and then Angela Dark emerged from a door at the back, the colours of anarchy blazing away, black tight-fitting business suit, black hair like a halo from Hell, red lipstick, red earrings, red scarf, red fingernails, red toenails too, probably, but they were obscured from view in a pair of black shoes.

She was shaking her head before she reached the door. 'No,' she was saying as she opened it, 'no, not today, no, nor any day in the foreseeable future, no.'

'I've got a story for you,' Plant said, entering in regardless and sitting down in one of the two black plastic chairs. Angela Dark remained standing, leaning back against the barrier of the reception bench, looking down on him.

'No way, no. You're full of stories, Plant, and they're all shit, which we all know you're full of.'

'This seems the obvious place to bring them.'

'Stick to writing fiction,' she said. 'Or better still, poems.'

'It's hot stuff,' he said.

'So why can't you use email like everyone else?'

'I prefer the personal touch.'

'Touch me and I'll sue.'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' he assured her, perhaps too vehemently. 'But you wouldn't want anyone hacking in and stealing an exclusive. Can't be too careful about internet security these days.'

'Since when has anything associated with you ever been exclusive, Plant?'

'When I bring it exclusively to you.'

'Bullshit,' she said. 'Or rather, Plant shit,' she corrected herself.

‘Someone tried to set fire to Paige Turner.’

‘Tried to?’ she repeated. ‘You mean they didn’t succeed? So where’s the story?’

‘Well, they lit the fire.’

‘But they didn’t burn the place down.’

‘No. Just some books.’

‘Pity.’

‘About the books?’

‘Fuck the books,’ she said. ‘What happened to the building? What happened to Turner?’

‘Nothing happened to the building. Or to Turner. It happened at night. No one was there.’

‘So why are you wasting my time telling me this?’

‘Generosity.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘I thought you might have some ideas about who might have done it.’

‘Why would I?’

‘You might have heard if anyone particularly dislikes Paige Turner.’

‘Not especially. Probably no more than any other publisher.’

‘Why?’

‘Everybody dislikes publishers. Everybody who ever has to deal with them. Especially their authors.’

‘Why?’

‘They never get enough sales, they never get enough promotion, they never get enough royalties, they never get enough fame. Same with every publisher, every author. “Look at me, look at me, look at me.”’

‘I’m looking at you,’ Plant said.

‘Not me, fuckwit. It’s the cry of every fucking author. Narcissists incorporated. All eternally hard done by.’

‘So it could be any of Turner’s authors.’

‘All of them.’

‘The particular books that were set fire to were by a character called Adam Redman.’

‘Not that maniac?’

‘That maniac.’

‘The man’s impossible.’

At least I don’t have to persuade her of that, Plant reflected.

‘You know him?’

‘Met him,’ she said. ‘Unfortunately. Basically he seems to spend his life attacking people like me. And then he expects me to go into bat for him.’

Not the metaphor Plant would have expected, but now that The Ashes had been rebranded The Men’s Ashes to allow equal attention for The Women’s Ashes, maybe she had made a study of cricket. Or the language of it.

‘He’s been harassing me with his boring, bloody pieces. A whole lot of nonsense about illiberal liberals and the lies of libertarianism and all the rest of it. He’s a maniac.’

‘Did you publish them?’

‘Did I what? Why don’t you read *The Dark Side* and find out for yourself? You’ve got a fucking nerve, Plant. You come round here pestering me and you don’t even subscribe.’

‘You monitor who subscribes?’

‘Fuck off Plant.’

‘So you didn’t.’

‘What?’

‘Publish Redman’s pieces.’

‘You’ve got to be joking. Of course I didn’t. Why in Hell’s name would I do something like that?’

‘He sees himself as some sort of progressive.’

‘Well I don’t.’

‘What do you see him as?’

‘I’d rather not see him at all.’

‘But his line?’

‘He thinks he’s some kind of hot-shot ultra-lefty but he comes across as a raving, rabid, racist reactionary.’

‘How come?’

‘How come? Have you ever met him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’d know unless you’re deaf and blind. The evils of immigration, the evils of Israel, the evils of the USA, the evils of free trade, the evils of capitalism.’

‘That seemed to be the theme of the book.’

‘So who had the bright idea to set fire to them? Old Turner finally got around to reading it after it was printed and found it was dead on arrival and panicked and decided to put it out of its misery? Or his misery. Realized he’d burned his fingers publishing it so decided to torch the lot?’

‘I don’t know. It’s what I’m trying to find out.’

‘Oh, now you tell me. “It’s what I’m trying to find out.” You’re not offering me a story at all, you’re running a bloody case, you’ve been hired to find out who did it and you’re just nosing round here to see if I can solve it for you.’

‘Pretty much,’ Plant agreed.

‘Why bother? I can’t see that anyone would care.’

‘Redman cares.’

‘So who does he think did it?’

‘Special Branch. Or, alternatively, ASIO.’

‘Not Mossad or the CIA or MI6?’

‘He hasn’t ruled them out.’

‘The man’s delusional. Why would they bother? It’s Turner, for sure. The book was crap and he decided to get rid of it after he’d finally read it.’

‘I don’t see Turner setting fire to his own stock. Why would he?’

‘Because it was rubbish. Wouldn’t you?’ she said.

‘I don’t know that it was rubbish.’

‘Of course it was.’

‘Maybe, say it was, but I don’t think Turner’s the sort of publisher to feel that that was any reason to burn a book. Let alone boxes of them.’

‘So what better reason would he need?’

‘I can’t think of one. I don’t think it was him,’ Plant said.

‘So if it wasn’t him it was Redman. Forget ASIO and Special Branch and all Redman’s psychobabble. That’s just distraction.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Of course it is. How do you attract these losers, Plant? Is it something they feel they have in common with you? Or some burning desire you have to bond with them?’

‘I didn’t attract him. I was hired by Turner.’

‘Same thing. They’re both losers. If it isn’t Turner then it has to be Redman himself. Trying to drum up some publicity. Another Reichstag fire. Or D. H. Lawrence’s *Rainbow*. Get himself some headlines.’

‘And has he?’

‘Not from me. Nor from anyone else that I’ve seen.’

‘Wouldn’t he have been phoning around if that was what he was up to? Letting everyone know. Have you heard from him?’

‘All too often.’

‘But lately?’

‘Not yet.’

‘And you don’t think there’s a story in it? Book burnings back in fashion?’

‘Maybe. I’m certainly not going to be running any of his bloody rabid ramblings, I can tell you that for sure. Is that it?’

‘That’s it.’

‘No more worthless tittle-tattle to unload?’

‘No.’

‘Bye then,’ she said, standing and ushering him out through the door.

‘Bye,’ he replied, but the door was already shut and she had disappeared from view.

Chapter 12

Plant was leafing through his dried out copy of *Illiberal Liberals* when Adam Redman phoned. Some might have welcomed the happy synchronicity of an author phoning while you were reading a book by the said author. Not Plant. His opening response to Redman’s announcing ‘Adam Redman here’ was a hardly welcoming ‘How did you get my number?’

‘Phoned the office.’

‘I don’t have an office,’ Plant said, churlishly, it might have been thought.

‘The Paige Turner office.’

‘Ah,’ Plant said.

There was silence at the other end.

‘So how can I help you?’Plant offered, not with any marked enthusiasm, but less peremptory than a ‘What do you want?’

‘What’s happening?’

‘In relation to what?’

‘My books, of course.’

‘Your books.’

‘Have you found out who did it?’

‘Did it?’

‘Set fire to them.’

‘No. No, I haven’t.’

‘So what progress have you made? Have you made any progress?’

He could simply have said ‘No’ again. Depressing, but that was the truth. But it was none of Redman’s business as far as Plant was concerned. Especially since Redman remained a possible suspect.

‘I report to Turner,’ he said. ‘When I find out anything I’ll tell him. Then he can tell you. If he wants. It’s up to him.’

‘They’re my books,’ Redman said.

‘Yes.’

‘So I’d like to know.’

‘I’m sure you would. But it’s a matter of client confidentiality. I can’t divulge details to anyone except whoever hired me. That’s the deal. That’s the contract.’

‘Hireling capitalist lackey,’ Redman said.

It could have been a joke. Maybe.

‘So my book gets suppressed and you just do nothing about it.’

‘I’m not doing nothing about it,’ Plant said. ‘But I’m not about to tell you anything at this stage.’

That wasn’t going to satisfy Redman. He made that clear, seething into the phone. It didn’t especially worry Plant. It wasn’t one of his clients seething, which they had been known to

do. That could be a matter for concern. But as for Redman, Plant listened calmly enough, letting the rage wash over him and disperse.

'The book's been suppressed. Turner didn't even get any review copies out before they destroyed it. It's obvious they targeted it. Made sure it gets no coverage and no sales. Who would do that? It's obviously a government job. ASIO or Special Branch. They want to silence me.'

'Maybe,' Plant said.

'Well who else could it be?'

'It could be you,' Plant said to himself, 'burning books to create a media story.' But he kept it to himself.

'I'm going public with this story,' Redman said.

No surprises there. Though if it really was a government job, then the media wouldn't be running any story, would they?

'Good luck with that.'

'You'll see,' Redman said.

'Fair enough,' Plant agreed. He couldn't see that it mattered. If some secret government agency had done it, then they would presumably be professional and experienced and competent enough to do it without leaving any traces of their involvement. There would be no way of pinning it on them. Maybe that was how you could be sure they did it, that there was no evidence. But it was hardly a conclusion that you could take to a court of law or make public.

But Redman made it public. Insofar as *News from the Dark Side* reached any public. There was nothing in the old media, newspaper or radio or television news. But *The Dark Side* ran a lead story. BOOK BURNING BACK. HOW THE STATE DEALS WITH DISSIDENT AUTHORS?

The question mark was no doubt to enable Angela Dark to claim that this was a question, not a defamatory assertion. But you could easily miss a question mark. And there were no questions in Adam Redman's responses to the interview that ran beneath the banner headline. There it was all assertion. In the victim's unchallenged words.

Now it was Plant on the phone.

'I thought you said Redman was bad news,' he said.

'And good morning to you, too, darling,' Angela Dark answered.

'So why did you give him an interview?'

‘News is news,’ she said. ‘Bad news is good news. Gets the most readers. You know that. Book burning’s nearly as good as a bleed lead. It would’ve been better if they’d set fire to Redman himself as well, but you can’t have everything. It’s triggered a lot of reaction. Looks like it could end up as one of our most read stories. Book burning’s hot stuff.’

‘Stoked up in the right way,’ Plant said.

‘Ha ha. If you only wrote like you speak you could try for a job as a journalist, Plant. Any time you need a career change...‘

‘No thanks,’ he tried to say. But she talked over him.

‘Just don’t go ringing this number.’

‘No way,’ he said.

But she had already hung up.

Turner was not amused.

‘I don’t need that sort of negative publicity. They thrive on that, those scandal sheets. I don’t. That’s one reason I didn’t want to involve the police.’

‘What was the other one?’

‘Other one? What other one? Oh, a figure of speech. *The* reason.’

‘You think if you’d involved the police, the story would’ve got out.’

‘Of course. It always gets out. Like it has now. If it’s bad news you get all the publicity you could ever imagine. Anything positive, forget it. Ask the press to publicize a new book and they just look blank. Books? What are they?’ Turner laughed. Sardonically.‘How the hell did she get onto the story, anyway? You been talking to her?’

It could have been that Plant’s visit had alerted her to the story’s potential. She could have phoned Redman as soon as Plant had left. On the other hand, Redman’s threat that he was going to take the story to the media might explain it. He could have contacted her. He could have contacted all the media. But no one else ran the story.

‘I think he called her himself,’ Plant said. ‘He’s convinced he’s being silenced. Particularly since no review copies got sent out.’

‘Ah, review copies.’ Turner chewed away reflectively. ‘Waste of money really. But we send out the usual handful. Only half a dozen places worth bothering with really. At most. But if

someone rings up for a review copy we send it out. The review editors are all on our data base. Like the bookshops. They get our emails about what's coming out.'

'And that's it?'

'Mailing books out without any certainty that they'll ever get noticed is bloody expensive. If the authors want to do it, great, I give them a top discounted price on copies and they can mail them out themselves. But they're just throwing them away most of the time. There's so much coming out and the papers that carry book reviews get fewer and those that do carry them have cut back their coverage and who reads reviews anyway? Who reads newspapers any more? So generally sending out masses of review copies is throwing good money after bad. As it were. I can't bear the waste, all those copies just mailed out and ignored. If you want to do it you've got to target some individual editor or features writer to get any notice. Phone them up. Woo them.

'Or you take some poor, tired, old hack out to lunch who's scratching around to fill his column and you give him a copy of the book and ask about a plug and he'll say, "Give me a couple of paragraphs to work with" and you'll go away and hack out seven hundred words or so and he'll put his name to them and send it in somewhere and he'll get paid and flog off the review copy and the piece appears all positive and favourable and everyone's happy.

'So either you hire a publicist to do it for you, or you find a way to do it yourself. And it's usually a waste of time and money whatever you do. Nightmare. Which is why I don't do it. After centuries in the business.'

'Sure,' Plant said, nodding in agreement, no surprises there. 'But according to Redman, the fire burned all his books up before the review copies got sent out.'

'Really? Ah well, tough titty. Since there aren't any copies left to sell it doesn't really matter, does it? Is that all he's going on about?'

'Plus the burning. He figures ASIO is intent on silencing him.'

'Nonsense,' Turner said. Authoritatively. As if he knew their modus operandi and this didn't fit. Plant registered it. Turner's certainty.

'You sound very authoritative.'

'If you can't speak authoritatively, then don't speak at all,' Turner said.

'Really?'

It didn't answer the implicit question, Plant noticed. Which could be something of an answer in itself.

'Of course. Far too crude for ASIO. They're professionals. Not low life vandals.'

'You know how they operate?'

'Got a fair idea.'

'Really?'

'Whatever you say about them, they'd know how to burn a place down. Not a pathetic amateur effort like this. This was a joke.'

'A joke?'

'How can you take it seriously when they made such a lousy job of it? Didn't even burn them up properly. Just got them water sodden.'

'I see what you mean,' Plant said. He'd been about to say 'True' or 'True enough,' but corrected himself. 'I see what you mean' didn't commit you to anything.

'Not that you have to take it as good clean fun. They managed to wipe out the entire print run one way or another. I don't find that at all amusing, I can assure you. But I don't know what was behind it or who could have done it. That's where you come in, Plant. Right?'

'Right.'

'We need to talk.'

'We are talking,' Plant said.

'You busy?'

'Busy enough,' Plant said. He was always busy. His default position. Whatever else it might look like. Never admit to idleness. Otherwise the devil will find something for you to do. Some futile investigation. Like trying to find out who might have set fire to some boxes of books.

'Free for lunch? Then you can bring me up to date.'

'I can bring you up to date now,' Plant offered. It won't take long, he could have added, less than a minute, given that there's nothing to say, nothing is known, nothing has been discovered.

But he didn't. Turner had cut across him immediately.

'No, keep it for lunch. You can tell me then. Got to maintain some traditions despite everything, for heaven's sake. Where would we be if there were no more publisher's lunches?'

Chapter 14

Turner took Plant to a Vietnamese restaurant a few blocks away in Marrickville. Most of the restaurants in Marrickville were Vietnamese. A couple of Greek ones hanging on, a Chinese, but the rest Vietnamese. Plant went for the vegetarian options, vegetarian spring rolls, and stir fry mixed vegetables with tofu. Turner ordered goi cuon and tom xao sate, fresh rice paper rolls and sate prawn.

'Not quite like old Saigon but it gives you a taste of it,' Turner said.

'You were in Saigon? What, in the war?'

'Do I look as old as that, for heaven's sake?' Turner said.

It was no answer, Plant noted. He tried again.

'But you were in Vietnam? You speak the language.'

'Enough to order a meal.'

'South East Asia,' Plant said, somewhat unnecessarily.

'And India. Afghanistan. Turkey.'

'You've travelled around.'

'Sure have.'

'Doing what?'

'This and that.'

'Work? Or pleasure?'

'They're not incompatible.'

'No. Publishing?'

'Sure, publishing.'

'According to *Who's Who* you were in the army.'

'Centuries ago.'

'What as?'

'Oh, this and that.'

'Intelligence?'

Turner laughed. 'Above average.'

‘Catering corps?’

‘Is that meant as a joke or an insult?’

‘Just a question.’

‘No, forget all that, that was light years ago.’

Was this the time and place to quiz Turner on his past life? Or his present life? But before Plant could probe any further Turner reverted to the issue on hand.

‘Why would anyone want to burn me down? I can’t see any reason to. I mean, why bother? Let’s face it, I’m a publisher of last resort. I’m no one’s number one choice. Not in the first half dozen. Top of the second division, maybe. Authors come to me when the big players have rejected them. Or dropped them from their lists for bad sales. You know what that atrocious agent had the hide to tell me?’

‘Which atrocious agent?’

‘One of them. They’re all pretty much the same. Dreadful creatures. Can’t remember her name, must have repressed it. “You should publish more women and gays,” she said. I mean, really. Women and gays have no trouble getting published. They’re the agenda, they’re the market, that’s what gets published. They don’t need to come to me, they’re snapped up immediately. I just get the dead, white, heterosexual males that none of the big players will touch any more. End of story. Anyway, I’m not complaining. I make a living. I’m just telling you that’s the way it is. So why would I be anybody’s target for a spot of arson? Totally delusional, that woman. Tells me until I get my priorities right she won’t be offering me any titles. Which was a blessed relief, I must say. She’d only be offering me the rubbish no one else wants. Why would I deal with agents? Forget it. It’s being told what I should do that I don’t like. Never did. Story of my career in some ways. But that’s another story. We’ll save that for another time. Unless I decide to bury it in the meantime.’

They got stuck into the food for a while.

‘Those coves like Redman,’ Turner continued. ‘Like most journalists or would-be journalists, they all think they’ve got all these books in them. But they don’t. Delusional. Like agents. They live in some parallel universe. Just wish they’d stay there. They don’t understand books. They’re all set up to write short pieces. Even a two page spread is short compared with a book. And sticking a whole lot of short pieces together isn’t the same as writing a book. Not that

some of them haven't got away with it. Published some myself. Nothing against that. When it works. Mostly it doesn't, though.'

'And Adam Redman?'

'I took the risk. Gave it a go. But there we are.'

'So what's happening with it now?'

'Well, they're all burned, aren't they? Or drowned.'

'Are you reprinting?'

'Have to think about it. Best to find out who did it first, don't you think? No point in reprinting and having the whole lot go up in flames again. So, getting back on track, who are our likely suspects? What sort of lunatics would have done it?'

'It's hard to say. He's attacking media liberals. His point is they share the same basic values as the reactionaries in most areas. Compared with his radical purity. Either lot might have felt they had a reason to burn his books. Even though they're supposedly oppositional, as far as Redman's concerned they share the same values. Evil ones, needless to say. So saying that could madden them both. Whether that's enough to kindle fire...'

'Are you trying to say that it's political, then?' Turner asked

'I'm saying it could be.'

'But you can't tell which lot.'

'No.'

'Can't say I'm convinced,' Turner said.

'Nor me,' Plant agreed.

Chapter 15

The ex, Turner had said, when Plant asked if he had any idea who might want to burn him down.

'The ex?'

'The ex. As in the extortionist,' Turner said.

'The extortionist?' Plant repeated blankly.

'The ex-wife.'

Not 'my ex-wife' Plant noted. No possessive, no retained connexion.

‘You think so?’

‘I wouldn’t put anything past her.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘How long ago did you...?’ Plant began, not sure of how to continue, could he use the divorce word? Part? Separate?

‘Not long enough,’ Turner said.

Beyond that there was no clarification. It was as if Turner immediately regretted mentioning her, preferred to shut down the topic. Plant tried probing further.

‘Does she harbour resentments?’

It sounded strange even to Plant. But how else could you put it? Turner just grunted.

‘So should I check her out?’

Turner grunted some more.

‘I mean, do you really think she would have...?’

‘Why not? She’s capable of anything.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘No idea.’

‘You’re not in touch.’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘So how do I find her?’

Turner shrugged.

‘Is she in Sydney?’

‘No idea.’

‘Don’t you have any contact details?’

‘Why would I want to contact her?’

It was Plant’s turn to shrug.

‘There you are then.’

‘I thought you might have some phone number or something somewhere. I mean, if you seriously think she might have done it, then I need to speak to her.’

‘I guess so,’ Turner said.

He pulled open his desk drawers one by one and searched through the contents. Nothing turned up until the bottom one, and then he took out an old, battered, pocket-sized address book from the days before mobile phones and computers, when people still wrote things like phone numbers down in books.

'You can try this,' he said, reading out an old landline number. 'No idea if it still works. Best I can do.'

It had not occurred to Plant that this might be a domestic affair. He thought it far more likely that it involved the book trade in some way or other. Writers, publishers, booksellers. Something in that area. Not something involving an ex-wife. But he had nothing much else to go on. Nothing much at all. So he called and arranged to see her. He didn't even know if she was the only ex-. Maybe there had been a succession of them. Let alone any more informal arrangements.

It was a charming old, red brick, Federation house on a generous block of land, a garden of trees and bushes, camellias, grevilleas, bottle-brushes and wattle. A couple of splendid flame trees flanked a mountain ash. The quarter acre blocks of Australian tradition still survived out here in Sydney's northern suburbs, safe so far from the rape of the inner-city, clear of the worst of the haze of pollution, though shrouded now with smoke from the bushfires. Lorikeets and noisy miners fluttered amongst the foliage and flowers. A blue-tongued lizard sunned itself on a chunk of rock. All very genteel and idyllic, with snakes no doubt lurking in the ground cover. Maybe amidst the crimson geraniums lining the concrete path up to the door.

He rang the bell and she answered, cigarette in hand, peering suspiciously over the top of her spectacles. Short grey hair framed the lined face of a smoker. She wore an old, vaguely grey t-shirt and once white, knee-length shorts. Barefooted. Plant estimated she was in her late fifties or sixties.

She looked at him interrogatively. Not even a 'Yes?'

'I phoned earlier,' Plant said.

'So you did,' she said, opening the door wider to let him in, down the hallway, into the living room. She gestured to an armchair, sat herself in another one. The room had that dark, protected from the heat of the sun ambience, built for shade and made even darker by the wealth of bushes crowding up to the windows outside. Paintings on the walls, statuettes on the sideboard and Royal Worcester porcelain in a dresser. Television. Old CD player and stack of CDs. No

bookcase. All the arts except literature. No books, no magazines, no newspapers scattered around, not a printed word. The paper-free home.

She didn't offer tea, biscuits, whisky, anything. She wasn't going to make any emissary of Turner's feel welcome. Maybe she didn't eat or drink, just smoked. But Plant didn't think so. He registered it as a conscious absence, a deliberate refusal, denial. Fair enough. He wasn't thirsty anyway. Or hungry. Though registering that, the absences, he began to feel stomach pangs and a dryness in the mouth. It was the sort of comfortable room that suggested chocolate digestives or shortbread. A cup of tea would have gone down well. But it was not forthcoming. Nor accompanying biscuits. A clock ticked like a metronome, tolling the passing seconds.

'Somebody set fire to him!' She roared with delighted laughter. 'Hope it singed his stupid whiskers.'

'No, it was some books they set fire to, not him.'

'Shame,' she said. 'Still, it's a start. Did it do lots of damage?'

'No.'

'Pity. Great pity.'

'It was just one title.'

'What, one pissy little book? You didn't come out here to tell me that?'

'One title, just a small stack of them.'

She didn't ask what title. She showed no interest in what it was that was burned. Just regret that it wasn't more and that it wasn't Turner himself.

'It was more water-damage than fire damage,' Plant said.

'But it still didn't drown the bastard.'

'No.'

'Pity. Great pity indeed.' She laughed. She looked Plant in the eye and gave a great uninhibited stream of laughter.

'Hope it sizzled his pubic hair and shrunk his shrivelled little penis.'

'No, it was just the books.'

'I can still hope, though,' she said. 'I can still imagine what might have been.' She laughed some more. 'Must have been fun.'

'I don't think anyone was there when it happened.'

‘Must have been someone there to start it.’

‘I guess so,’ Plant said.

‘How else would it have started?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

But now that she had spelled it out he wondered. A time fuse, an electronically triggered spark, had anyone done any proper forensic examination? Certainly not Plant. Not when he had first been shown the scene. And the next time he was there it had all been cleaned up. Not the best of investigative procedures. It was as if someone had wanted it all cleaned up and swept away. Hold that thought, he told himself. He should have jotted it down in the little A7 notebook he carried. But he didn’t. The ex was quite inhibiting. Inhibiting him from doing anything. He realized he wasn’t even asking questions in any useful or productive way. He tried to get back on track but it was useless. She just laughed. She sat there chuckling, very well pleased. But whether well pleased with herself or just the situation Plant had described, he could not tell.

‘Why would I know who wanted to burn him down? Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve had nothing to do with him or the business for years. It’s not that, is it? You’re not asking me if I know who might have done it. What it is, is, he’s trying to make out that I did it, isn’t he? You think I tried to burn him down, that’s what he’s told you, isn’t it?’

Plant had no immediate answer to that. He could have said, ‘Yes, that was what Turner said.’

Though whether Turner had meant it literally, applied to this specific case, or whether it was more a general assertion about his feelings about his ex, based on her financial demands in the divorce settlement, was not ultimately clear. The extortionist, he’d called her. But not the arsonist, not the incendiarist.

‘Why would I want to burn him down? I’ve still got shares in the stupid business. They’re pretty well worthless, but I wouldn’t want to wipe out whatever pathetic equity I’ve got left, would I?’

‘So are you a partner? Are you the Paige in Paige Turner?’

‘Paige? Who, me? No. Why would I be? There isn’t any Paige. Not that I ever heard of. No, I just have equity in the company. I wouldn’t say I was a partner. Partner!’ She made a snorting noise of contempt and dismissal. ‘All I ever was was someone to blame when things

went wrong. Which they did all the time. That's what it's about, isn't it? He's still trying to blame me for anything that goes wrong for him. Right?'

'Well...'

'You don't need to lie to me, young man. I can see right through you.'

The 'young man' was a nice touch. You could take it as flattering these days. The days passing rapidly. He wasn't so keen on the transparency, or worse, the permeability. Being seen right through gave him a great sense of discomfort, as if being shot through with arrows. He wondered what it felt like to be shot through with arrows. Or bullets for that matter. Merely to have been penetrated by a gaze wasn't that terrible perhaps, not compared with the other options.

'I need to identify any possible enemies he might have,' Plant said.

'Why ask me? Why not ask him?'

'I have asked him, obviously, but he suggested you might have some ideas.'

'No he didn't, he suggested that I might have done it, that's what he suggested. Wasn't it?'

Plant said nothing. Nothing much he could say.

'Why would I do it? Why would I care for heaven's sake? The man's ridiculous.'

'Some resentment, some grudge?' Plant offered.

'Revenge, oh yes, what do you think I am? Do you think I've got nothing better do do than to think about him? Why would I waste time thinking about him? He never enters my head. I wasted enough of my precious life living with him, why would I waste the rest in thinking of him? The man's obsessed. All he cares about is his bloody books. Load of bloody rubbish if you ask me, I wouldn't even waste a match on them.

'Those stupid cookbooks. They cost him nothing. Marks them up ridiculously. Obscenely. Buy cheap and sell high. His only principle. Gives him an excuse to go to Asia and fuck his underage whores and claim the trip against tax. Sleaze. The epitome of it.

'You want to know what he's like? I'll tell you what he's like.'

It wasn't quite what Plant had come to ask. But he listened anyway.

'One time we have an argument in the office. Well, one time, every blasted time. But this time I've run out of cigarettes so I go out to pick some up and when I get back I find I've left my keys in the office and the door's locked and I can't get back in. So I ring the buzzer and he ignores it. And I ring again and say it's me and he says "Who? Go away." So I try and get the

crappy lock to open and I'm just breaking in and the cops show up. They call him up. They say there's a woman who claims to be your wife trying to break in. "Never seen her before," he says, "nothing to do with me." And the cops take me down to the station and they're going to charge me and he just lets it happen.'

'What happened then?'

'He picked me up in the end. Thought it was a great joke. That's the sort of arsehole he is.'

Plant suppressed any sign of amusement. Any sign of anything.

'I could've killed him,' she said.

Plant looked across at her.

'No,' she said, half smiling, but only half, 'I didn't. I know what you're thinking. But if I'd been going to do anything I'd have done it then. I wouldn't have waited till now. And I wouldn't just have messed around with some stupid books, I can assure you. I'd go straight for him.

'Or do you think I paid someone to so it? Is that what you're thinking. Forget it. I am totally over books and anything to do with them, writers, publishers, printers, binders, the lot. And no, I don't know any of his authors or printers or binders or staff or any of them and nor do I want to. Right?'

She took out another cigarette and lit it. A way of saying put that in your pipe and smoke it, perhaps, without giving him tobacco, pipe or match, just a flow of words, and a flame.

Chapter 14

Turner phoned.

'You busy? Can you get over here?'

'Sure,' Plant said. 'You've found something out?'

'Not exactly. But you never know. That's why I need you. If you're free.'

'Sure,' Plant said again. Always busy, always free.

'Can you get over here? Within the hour?'

'Sure,' Plant said, yet once more. 'What's up?'

‘Got a visitor coming over.’

‘Oh yes. Who?’

‘The beastly Bentley.’

‘What, not the British publisher?’

‘No less.’

‘What’s he doing in town?’

‘What indeed?’

‘Interesting.’

‘Just telling you. I don’t mean anything. Necessarily.’

‘Sure.’

‘But yes. Interesting.’

‘I’ll be there, then,’ Plant assured him.

Bentley was a bluff, clean cut, clean shaven, polished shoes, no nonsense, well connected, well preserved, officer class type maybe ten or fifteen years younger than Turner. Whether he was any sort of descendant of the great nineteenth-century British publisher Richard Bentley was unproven. He never actually claimed that he was. Nor did he claim to be Chinese. But his regular trips to Asia and his frequent sojourns there, and a general sense that there had to be something more than usually dodgy had got him his nickname, Bent Lee, the crooked Chinaman. Bland and inscrutable, he might have been a Eurasian from Singapore or Hong Kong, or the privileged product of an English public school, or both. Plant had encountered him before, but Bentley showed no sign of recognition when he arrived, just a polite greeting. It could have implied prior acquaintance, or nothing much at all beyond observance of the social conventions. He made no comment, anyway.

‘What are you up to, then?’ Turner asked. ‘Or have you just come out here to annoy me?’

‘Yes, all the way from the old U.K.,’ Bentley said. He made it sound like some traditional song from the days of music halls.

‘England too hot to hold you?’

‘Not at all. You don’t believe in all that man-made global warming nonsense, do you?’

Turner probably didn't but he wasn't going to take the same position as Bentley. Not on anything. It caused a delay in his coming up with any response, however. And before he could formulate anything, Bentley had surged ahead.

'Can't say the same about here, though. You've been starting up your own fires, people tell me.'

'Who tells you?'

'Oh, word gets around. What happened? You were cooking the books and the pot tipped over?'

Turner decided on silence. It didn't faze Bentley.

'Pity the sprinklers kicked in so soon, otherwise you'd have been a winner. Rid of all that dead stock.'

Turner refused to be provoked.

'Could've caused a cash flow problem, of course. Unless you had a second set of books somewhere. Which you would have had, knowing you, wouldn't you?'

'Bentley, has anyone ever told you that you're a pain in the arse,' Turner said.

'Not with impunity,' Bentley grinned, cracking his knuckles.

'So why are you here?'

'Social call.'

'I mean, why are you in Australia?'

'Like I said, social call.'

Turner grunted disbelief.

'I love a sunburnt etc. I have many good friends here,' Bentley said

Turner grunted some more. Unchanged disbelief. Plant sat and watched.

'Looking for a job, is that it?' Turner asked. 'Out of work again?'

'Not at all. Gainfully employed, as ever.'

'Who with this time?'

'Can't say right now, old chum.'

'Work of the devil,' Turner suggested.

'Everyone is always so welcoming,' Bentley said.

'What is it you want?'

‘What do I want? I want nothing. I am happy and replete and fulfilled. Why should I want anything?’

‘Good,’ Turner said.

‘But what is it that *you* want?’

‘Me? Nothing.’

‘Nothing will come of nothing. Come on, you want to sell up?’

‘No.’

‘Sure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Ah well, next time then.’

‘What do you mean, next time?’ Turner snapped.

‘Next time I visit this Antipodean paradise. What did you think I meant, next time you have a fire?’

Plant wondered, was that a threat, or the jolly badinage of old friends and associates?

‘Is that a threat?’ Turner asked.

‘Not at all. How could it be a threat?’

‘Just jolly badinage,’ Plant offered.

‘How well you put it,’ Bentley said.

Turner grunted some more.

‘So this fire,’ Bentley said, ‘what were you up to? Setting the world ablaze? Or thinking you could end the latest terrible drought with a bit of H2O? Or the printers were drumming up business, were they? Hot to trot. Wanting to do a replacement run. There’s a message in it, you know, old chum. You’re being told to get with it. Give up this archaic fixation on books and paper and get with the digital revolution. E-books. Take it as a friendly warning.’

‘Hardly that friendly,’ Plant said, Turner sitting there silent, working on refusing to be provoked.

‘Still, he needs to take it on board. The dangers of outdated technology. Obsolete means of production. Fire hazard, clearly. Get with the new.’

‘That’s your advice?’ Turner said.

‘Always has been. Always will be. In the words of the bard, “Make it new.” You chaps are too set in your ways. Too backward looking. The world’s changed.’

‘More’s the pity,’ Turner said.

‘Futile regrets. Pointless. You’ve got to go with the flow. Stay ahead of the game. Don’t get mired in the past. Though you like that, don’t you? That cosy feeling. Everything familiar. But it’s an illusion. All is change. You know that, old chum. Or you should. By now. Next time you have a problem, don’t just go and light a fire. You don’t want to end up with people calling you a burnt out case. Come to me. I can always help you out. You know me.’

‘I do,’ Turner said, but not as if it were a wedding vow.

‘So,’ Bentley called out, standing in the doorway to offer a farewell wave of dismissal, ‘see you at your festival.’

‘Festival? What festival?’ Turner said. ‘What do you mean, my festival?’

‘Well, not necessarily you personally. I didn’t imagine you’d be a major sponsor. More you generically.’

‘What “you”?’

‘You inner-city celebrants.’

‘Celebrants?’

‘Your inner-city festival celebrating the arts and entertainment.’

‘Never heard of it.’

Bentley’s farewell wave faltered, his arm dropped.

‘You trying to semaphore me?’ Turner asked.

‘You’re telling me you’ve not heard of your inner-city celebration of arts and crafts, writers and readers, poetry and performance and the rest of it?’

‘There’s more?’

‘Brilliant,’ Bentley said. ‘That’s all I need. Fly out to the ends of the earth to a festival no one’s heard of.’

‘You didn’t come out specially for it? Another cocked-up author tour?’ Turner asked. Hopefully.

Bentley looked momentarily disconcerted.

‘Not exactly,’ he said. ‘More a case of I was going to be out this way so I slotted it in.’

Turner put on his pull the other leg face.

‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that. How else?’

‘How did you hear about it?’

Bentley shrugged. ‘One hears things.’

‘Really?’

‘Chaps tell you. Give you a call. Ask if you’re available.’

‘And you always are, of course.’

‘I was coming out here.’

‘What for?’

‘Oh, the usual.’

‘Business? Pleasure?’

‘Why not?’

‘Who’s organizing the festival?’ Plant asked.

‘Clearly nobody.’

‘Do they have a name?’

‘Ned Kelly.’

‘Well there you are,’ Turner laughed.

‘Not Ted Kelly?’ Plant asked.

‘You got a problem with N words?’ Bentley said.

‘Looks like you might have,’ Turner chuckled.

‘Now you tell me.’

‘Could’ve told you earlier if you’d asked,’ Turner said. ‘The man’s a lost cause.’

‘What, one of your authors?’

‘Oddly enough, he was once.’

‘Till you terminated him.’

‘Well, just his books got remaindered.’

‘No wonder he didn’t tell you about it.’

‘About what?’

‘The festival.’

‘What festival? Doesn’t look like he’s told anyone about it. I haven’t seen any notices. When’s it supposed to be on?’

‘At the weekend.’

‘Well there you are. Usual stuff-up. No publicity. No promotion. That’s why his book didn’t sell.’

‘Didn’t you say you were his publisher?’

‘Publishers can only do so much. Even you know that. If the author won’t get behind a book and promote it, what can you do? Forget it.’

‘And he forgot you so you never got to hear of his festival.’

‘Why would I be interested in his festival anyway?’ Turner asked. ‘I already told you, he’s hopeless.’

‘A chance to sell some books?’ Bentley suggested.

Turner laughed.

‘You flew out here to sell all of three copies. Seven if you’re lucky. Times must be tough over there. Is it true what I read, that you only need to buy yourself four hundred copies to get onto the *Sunday Times* bestseller list?’

‘A bit out of your league, isn’t it, selling four hundred copies?’ Bentley said, giving another wave. ‘So I guess you’ll never know the answer to that, will you?’

‘If you sell four I’ll be amazed.’

‘Stay amazed,’ Bentley said. ‘In the world of virtual reality, sales and attendance at festivals are irrelevant.’

‘That’s fortunate, then,’ Turner said.

‘You don’t get it, old chum, do you? We’re in the cyber age. It’s getting the internet promotion that matters, not the actual attendance. That’s how people get to know about new books, that’s what sells them. Not bums on seats but eyes on the screen. Or phone.’

‘So you won’t be offended if I don’t turn up?’ Turner said.

‘Not at all.’

He gave a genial wave and left.

‘Pity,’ Turner muttered.

‘So what’s Bentley doing here?’ Plant asked, after he had gone.

‘Who knows?’ Turner said. ‘Nothing good, for sure.’

‘Being a global predator and buying up independent publishers?’

‘Could be. Closing them down and getting rid of the competition, more likely.’

‘Not looking for authors to steal?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Why would he be doing that? Who needs any more authors?’

‘So what’s he up to? Is he still in publishing? Or just trying to promote one of his novels.’

‘Probably both. No idea who he’s working for at the moment, though. Could be between jobs.’

‘So looking for something, maybe?’

‘I’ve no idea. But I sure wish he’d find it and go away.’

‘You’ve met him before.’

‘Everyone’s met him before. And never to their advantage.’

‘So what’s he doing here?’

‘No bloody idea. That’s what I’d like to know. Or probably wouldn’t like to know if I knew. Filling in time till things cool down in the U.K. or Asia. Or out here to see some old flame.’

‘A ladies’ man?’

‘Up to a point.’

‘Gay?’

‘No. Well, could be. English public school and all that. Or so he claims. Not sure that ladies’ man is the right term, though.’

‘Female persons, then.’

‘No, it’s not that. It’s not just a matter of sex. He’s into anything. Everything.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘You name it. Money, power, prestige, information. Apart from breach of promise, divorce, non-payment of alimony, sexual harassment, statutory rape, paedophilia, and possession of prohibited substances, probably. Who knows? Something seedy anyway.’

‘But not a good sign.’

‘He never is and he never has been,’ Turner said. ‘And never will be,’ he added for good measure.

‘How did he hear about the fire?’

‘How does he hear about anything? But he always does.’

‘You don’t think he had anything to do with it, do you?’

‘Why not? Nothing would surprise me about him. But I can’t see why he would have. He’s not said anything.’

‘Would he, if he’d done it?’

‘If he’d done it for a reason, maybe.’

‘And he wouldn’t have done it without a reason?’

‘The old pyromaniac psychopath number? Not really his style. But nothing’s impossible with him.’

‘It’s an interesting synchronicity,’ Plant said. ‘His being here at the same time.’

‘Synchronicity,’ Turner snorted.

‘Coincidence, then.’

‘I don’t believe in coincidences.’

‘Who does?’ Plant asked.

Chapter 15

Fullalove had dried out his copy of *Illiberal Liberals* and had been studying it.

‘Not bad,’ he said. ‘Quite a firebrand, isn’t he? Denouncing the failings of our society. You’ve got to give it to him, it’s a good scissors and paste job. All this stuff is known, none of it’s new, it’s all been written about somewhere or other, but it gets buried and disregarded. He’s done a good job resurrecting it all. Keep it afloat and people might start to notice. Maybe. Maybe not.’

He took a deep drag on the ever present joint in his hand before passing it across to Plant.

‘He kicks off with an historical account of how free trade and free movement of labour impact on the traditional work force. Put it out of work, basically, by cheap, immigrant labour and progressive casualization of jobs. In the immortal words of war criminal Blair, ‘You can’t expect a job for life.’ What a shining example of that he was. Fewer and fewer low paid workers have full-time jobs any more. Amazon destroys the book trade and retail. Uber destroys taxis. Whitlam’s reduction of tariffs began the destruction of the motor industry and the clothing industry. Chapter two he gets onto the privatization of insurance, health, airlines, electricity, transport and how this inevitably puts up prices since the priority now becomes not service but

the opportunity for the shareholders and CEOs to structure things to gouge out dividends and bonuses. Then he gets onto how the media in collusion with the government and their advertisers basically suppress the truth about any of this. All good stuff.

'He misses a few things he could've gone on about. Like Royal Australian Naval vessels seizing cargoes of drugs in the Persian Gulf. That's piracy. You've heard of state-sponsored terrorism, that's state-sponsored piracy. Like Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh. No bloody business of the navy. Anyway, apart from a few things like that, he's covered the ground pretty well. I can see why someone might think of setting fire to it.

'Though it's hard to see why they would if you think about it. Why make an issue of it by starting a fire? Just keep quiet, lean on a few editors and management and make sure it gets no coverage, so he doesn't get interviewed, doesn't get reviewed, doesn't make the talk shows. Not that most authors ever do, so it's no big deal ensuring that. Have a word to the big chains, not that they'd be stocking it amidst the schlocky crime and romance and celebrity biographies, anyway. I mean, really, just make sure everyone keeps quiet about it and it would vanish without a trace. Like most books.'

'And end up here,' Plant said, gesturing at the unacceptable, politically incorrect, radical, reactionary and salacious books lining Fullalove's walls, reaching up to the ceiling, stacked along the hallway. 'Vanished, but hardly without a trace.'

'They're waiting their time,' Fullalove said. 'When I get this show up and running they'll be leaping off the shelves.'

'And shaking the foundations of the state.'

'Why not?' Fullalove said. 'But back to the issue in hand, if our rulers were really worried they could just have had a word with old Turner. The old boy network. If he thinks he belongs to that world, or wants to belong to it even if he doesn't belong, and most publishers do, belong or want to belong, then he'd come into line. They'd just tell him to cut back on the promotion, not that he does much anyway. He'd love to respond to a call from the establishment. He'd polish his shoes and trim his moustache and leap at the opportunity. Tell the shops it's out of print. Just fail to supply. There are much easier ways of suppressing books than burning them and drawing attention to them.

'And you've got to consider the probability that they've known about it all along, so they've probably already had a little chat to Turner, made sure he was never going to do anything

for it, just print it and sit on it, best way to suppress something. Which is the easiest and likeliest scenario. So why draw attention to it by a fire? So, no, not the secret arm of the state.

'It isn't going to be the ex, either,' Fullalove continued. 'I guess you had to check her out since he suggested it, but it's never going to be her.'

'Is that so? I thought you always insisted on *cherchez la femme*.'

'But not *cherchez la veuve*.'

'She's not a widow.'

'As good as. Same thing really. She's got his house and his assets so he might as well have died and left it all to her. She's got what she wanted, why would she mess with him any more?'

'Why did Turner suggest her, then?'

'Bitterness. Revenge. Unresolved issues. Or distraction. To put you off the scent.'

'Why would he want to put me off the scent?'

'That's for you to find out.'

'No it isn't.'

'He's up to something, don't you want to know what it is?'

'He's hired me to look into the fire.'

'Which he never told the police or fire brigade about and so never made an insurance claim. You can't make a claim like that without a police report. So why's that, do you think?'

'Why does he hire me, then?'

'Maybe he doesn't have any idea who could've done it. And it's impinging on whatever else it is he's up to. It's making him anxious.'

'Well it would, wouldn't it? Having somebody set fire to your place. Not that he seems especially anxious.'

'It doesn't add up,' Fullalove said.

'So now you're saying he doesn't know who started it. Or does he?'

'That's what you need to find out.'

'But if he knows...?'

'Then, bingo, the case is solved. But if he doesn't you'll have to keep on looking. And ask yourself why he didn't call the police or fire brigade.'

‘It’s not just Turner,’ Plant said. ‘Why doesn’t Redman contact them? He’s angry as hell about losing his books and yet he isn’t doing anything. He just moans at me.’

‘Too paranoid. Read his book and you’ll see that. He thinks he’s the prophet come out of the desert or something. Denouncing all the evils of our capitalist society.’

‘And?’

‘So he’s convinced the security services or the feds are on to him. He’s told you that enough times. So the last people he’d want to contact would be any more police.’

‘How would the security services have known about his book before it was released?’

‘That’s their business. It’s what they’re set up to do.’

‘How, though?’

‘He probably shopped it around. Tried different publishers. Someone who rejected it could’ve tipped them off. Agent Orange could’ve dobbed him in. That’s what agents are for. That’s why they call them agents.’

‘No, it isn’t. And you don’t believe that it was spooks who did it, anyway.’

‘No,’ Fullalove agreed.

‘But they could’ve been tipped off about it.’

‘Almost certainly.’

‘So it’s not impossible that they did it.’

‘You want to tangle with them? Give ASIO a phone call and ask, “Have you been burning any good books lately?” Or maybe from their point of view you’d have to say bad books. You think they’d tell you? In the interests of transparency and accountability?’

‘You’re saying we’d never find out if they did it, so we just decide they didn’t do it.’

‘For an easier and longer life, why not?’ Fullalove said.

‘So where does that leave us? Who else would it be?’

‘What about one of his friends? Someone Redman’s pissed off at some point.’

‘He doesn’t have any friends.’

‘Really?’

‘So he said. Sad really.’

‘Or realistic. What about enemies?’

‘Same thing.’

‘What, he claims he doesn’t have any?’

‘I think he’s just a total loner.’

‘How about some rival author with a similar book, then? Some faction of the far left that think he’s ideologically incorrect? Some ditto of the far right? Some pyromaniac delinquent fireman looking for something to set fire to? A trainee terrorist? Someone in the office that Redman pissed off? Redman himself drumming up a story? There’s no end of possibilities.’

‘None of it makes any sense,’ Plant said.

‘The triumph of post-modernism,’ Fullalove grinned.

‘Oh, I forgot to tell you,’ Plant said.

‘Ah, the convenient amnesia.’

‘I just forgot.’

‘That’s all right. It’s a common phenomenon.’

‘Turner had a visitor.’

‘And now we have the return of the repressed.’

‘Something like that. Bentley called in.’

‘Not the ugly Englishman?’

‘The beastly Brit. No less.’

‘Paying his annual visit? Or not actually paying, in his case, no doubt. All paid for. Escape the cold weather and do a bit of dirty business on the side.’

‘What dirty business? Promoting his latest spy novel?’

‘How would I know?’ Fullalove said, but he carried on confidently as if he did know, and perhaps he did. ‘Not publishing, whatever he claims. Moving money around for MI6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 and the rest of them maybe, or financing some off-the-books operation with a dope deal.’

‘That’s what you said about Turner.’

‘Did I? I think Bentley’s higher up the food chain than Turner. But they’re all much of a muchness.’

‘Who are?’

‘People like them,’ Fullalove said.

‘Bentley was a distinguished name in British publishing,’ Plant said.

‘Till they got taken over by Macmillan in 1897. And now Macmillan’s got taken over by some German outfit. Like the Germans took over Bentley cars. All inauthentically British. Which is naturally appropriate for a crooked Chinaman.’

‘But he’s not actually Chinese.’

‘Bent Lee? Probably not. Though I imagine if he figured it would get him into the diversity quota for BBC television he’d claim he was. Sell his creepy spy novels to them. I think he’s all things to all men. And women. Publisher, novelist, womanizer – like he thinks he’s an up-dated version of Graham Greene. So you can add spy to that list. And he comes out to Australia too often for anybody’s good.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Nothing good, you can bet on that. Trying to promote one of his dreadful novels, you said. That could just be cover, of course. Could be out of a job, the way publishing’s going. Or looking for a job. Or setting up a bolt hole for when he has to leave the old U.K. in a hurry. Not so easy just to slip into eastern Europe and vanish any more.’

‘You don’t like him.’

‘Nor do you. It’s just the type. That ruling class arrogance.’

‘You think he’s ruling class? Really?’

‘Probably not. He’d like to be and he pretends to be. That’s good enough for me. But no, probably not. I don’t think you ever get to meet the ruling class. They keep themselves pretty secure, I’d reckon. Get their trusty upper servants to do their dirty work for them. People like Bentley.’

Chapter 16

Fullalove insisted on going to Bentley’s festival session.

‘I don’t even know where it’s happening,’ Plant said.

‘I do, I checked it out on-line,’ Fullalove said, and insisted on telling him. Plant was unenthused.

‘I’ve been to enough author sessions and book signings.’

‘See what he’s up to,’ Fullalove said.

‘How would you ever know? He’s not renowned for truth-telling.’

‘So you find out what he’s lying about.’

‘And what does that achieve?’

‘You never know. See who he turns up with, see who he meets.’

‘Why?’

‘Turner gets set on fire and Bentley happens to turn up. How’s that for synchronicity?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Worth checking out, anyway. Someone like him.’

‘Maybe. Feel free. I’ll pass.’

‘No,’ Fullalove insisted. ‘You need to be there. Find out what he’s got to say. I’ll keep you company.’

‘You really think Bentley’s the sort of person who’d burn Turner down?’

‘Why not? If it was for something he wanted.’

‘Like what? The only thing he ever seems to want is sex as far as I’ve heard. Usually there’s some woman in the picture.’

‘Maybe. Though whether that’s his motivation or it’s just a bit on the side, who knows? Could just be cover. Whatever it seems to be, it probably isn’t.’

‘Cover for what?’

‘Good question. Though the fact that he makes you feel it’s cover might suggest that it isn’t. He exudes that seedy spookiness but that might just be to try and promote his seedy spook novels. If you were really a spook, that’s the last thing you’d want to exude, you’d think. Though there again, that could be a double bluff.’

‘A bit risky.’

‘Risky, risqué, that’s him. Penny wise, pun foolish.’

‘Maybe he’s just promoting his books.’

‘Hardly worth flying round the world for one dodgy festival.’

‘No,’ Plant agreed.

‘Which is why you need to come along and hear him.’

‘And find out what he’s really up to?’

‘Yes.’

‘Except he’s not going to tell us, is he?’

‘Not intentionally.’

‘So why bother?’

‘See who else turns up, see what slips out. You never know.’

‘And probably never will.’

‘Probably not,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘But it’ll get you out of the house. Better than sitting around watching bad television.’

‘I don’t watch bad television.’

‘There isn’t any other sort. What an empty life you must lead. It’ll do you good to get out and about.’

Bentley’s session was booked into an old, dark, cavernous pub, sound-proofed, shadowed, silent as the grave.

‘What sort of pub is this?’ Plant asked. ‘I remember when pub’s used to be full at five o’clock.’

‘It’s a late night venue. It doesn’t get going till nine or ten. Then it’s seething. That’s obviously why they booked Bentley in for five o’clock. Drum up a bit of business.’

‘They need a louder drummer,’ Plant said, looking round the empty bar.

‘Think we should get a drink?’ Fullalove suggested.

‘Probably.’

‘I’ll have a beer.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Whenever you’re up for it.’

‘Right,’ Plant said.

In the end he went for it. Walked to the bar. Nothing else was happening. No one was coming or going. The barman fiddled around arranging glasses and bottles and anything else he could arrange. Plant ordered a couple of beers and took them to the dark corner Fullalove had settled in.

‘Cheers,’ Fullalove offered, taking a swig.

Time seeped away.

Outside it was probably still bright sunlight. Or blue bushfire smoke. Who could tell? In the pub it was a dim, dull, grey, a half light. Shrouded. Inspissated gloom, to quote Dr Johnson. Plant quoted him. To himself. There was no conversation.

They'd been there a while, a small eternity, when the door swung open and Anya came into the pub. She stood there, holding the door open, and Chloe followed, holding a cardboard box in front of her which she set down on the nearest table. Bentley brought up the rear, giving a quick reconnoitre of the empty room.

'Are we having a bet on how many copies he sells?' Fullalove asked. 'Five max, I reckon. Maybe six if he's in luck.' He looked round the empty bar. 'Though I doubt it.'

Plant doubted it too, but he was not a betting man.

'You reckon he carries boxes of them round the world with him?' Fullalove asked. 'Or does he have stashes of them everywhere he calls? Stored in left-luggage lockers. Safe deposits. Self-storage units.'

Plant shook his head. Silent. Unknowing.

'He's not taking them out, see. He's done this before. Oh so many times. See him check out the room, check out if there's any buyers. He's not going to put his books out on display if no one's buying. Too humiliating. See, look, he's stopping her.'

Chloe had been opening up the box, folding back the cardboard top to take out the books, but Bentley came back from the bar and said something to her. Something like 'No' no doubt. She stopped, a book half way out of the box, and put it back in. Bentley tucked the top flaps of the box back down, gave it a pat to make sure all was enclosed and in place, and steered Chloe to the bar where Anya stood ordering drinks.

A young couple came in, boy met girl, went to the bar, ordered, looked round expectantly.

'That makes seven,' Fullalove said. 'If everyone buys a copy that makes seven sales. Except Bentley won't be buying his own book so that makes six. Deduct us, that makes it four, max.'

Plant nodded. There was nothing to say. No one spoke. Not Plant, not Fullalove, not the young couple, not Bentley sitting there stony-faced, not Anya, not Chloe, dutifully silent. Time passed.

The door swung open again letting the drone of rush hour traffic break into the silence. and Ted Kelly came in with a couple more people, took a look round, spotted Bentley and headed over to him. There was a raised platform at one end of the room, a table and a couple of chairs set up on it, a microphone on the table. Kelly took Bentley across to it. Chloe took the box of books across to them. Then she took it back. Bentley sat down on one of the chairs. Kelly picked up the microphone and counted into it. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten. There was some fussing around as he searched for where to switch on the microphone. Then he counted again.

'One two three four five six seven eight nine ten. Welcome to this session of the inner-city celebration of arts and so on. Maybe if you all came up closer...'

They all came up closer to the platform. Plant and Fullalove, the young couple, the older couple who'd come in with Kelly, and Anya and Chloe.

'Eight,' Fullalove said. 'Ten if you count Kelly and Bentley. You reckon he'll lose it?'

'Who?'

'Bentley. Get peeved at no audience and have a hissy fit and storm out?'

Plant looked at Bentley but could deduce nothing.

'Hard to tell,' he said.

'Exac'ly. Professional to the last. Steely self-control. The man's a killer.'

'Still doesn't make him an arsonist,' Plant said.

When the shuffling and rearranging of chairs had more or less finished, Kelly welcomed them again.

'Well, welcome to this "in conversation" series of the inner-city celebration of arts and stuff. Sorry about the size of the audience, or lack of it, so much on these days, the music sessions have been packed, literature's struggling a bit, but here we are.'

Then he introduced Bentley. Novelist, publisher, traveller.

Bentley suggested that since it was such an intimate gathering they could drop the formalities. Have perhaps more of a general conversation than a monologue from him, not just him holding forth, so anyone else feel free to just chip in.

Kelly agreed and proceeded to reminisce about happy times in the sub-continent he'd shared with Bentley.

Bentley said he'd set one of his books there and had the odd scene in another but with his latest he was back in Europe.

The man from the couple who'd come in with Kelly chipped in and took them back to Asia.

'You remember that place there used to be in...'

Whatever it was, Kelly remembered and joined in too.

They talked across each other for a while. Bentley went along with it. As far as Plant could see he accepted it with weary resignation. Sipped his drink. Said a few words when he could get them in between Kelly and the other man's reminiscences. Once or twice he mentioned his latest book, but he showed no signs of desperately trying to promote it, or any of the others he had put his name to. He'd taken one copy out of the cardboard box and had it on the table there, but he wasn't maniacally holding it up or waving it around. Why would you to an audience of eight? Fiascos like this were evidently not something unknown to him. Grin and bear it and ride it out.

Except that having ridden it out for an hour they were plunged immediately into the next session. One of Kelly's old mates with a first-hand reminiscence of the old hippy trail, overland from Melbourne to Earls' Court, with a few bits over sea by boat and then overland by train and camel and shank's pony, step by step, every single step. It was the man who had come in with Kelly, shaggy, dishevelled, irrepressible. He set up his computer with his file of historic photographs as Kelly introduced him. And off he launched.

'You can't just go and leave now,' Kelly told Bentley, 'He and his partner came to fill out your session, you've got to do the same for him, fair's fair and all that.'

Anya and Chloe smiled sweetly, no problem.

Half a dozen more people had drifted in, but Kelly had a point. Fair's fair and all that. Bentley settled back down on a couch between Anya and Chloe and closed his eyes, opening them occasionally as he reached for his drink. Anya kept him replenished.

After an hour of spontaneous travelogue interspersed with visual aids the hippy trail had reached Indonesia. Still South East Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan to go. Then over to the Mediterranean and across Europe. Kelly nodded off. Plant tried to but couldn't get comfortable. After the second hour the bar gradually began to fill up with young folks for the music session. The hippy trail reached the Middle East.

As the Mediterranean coast came into sight Bentley stood up and headed for the door. Anya followed. Chloe collected the box of books and went out after them. The hippy trail narrator faltered momentarily but carried on regardless. Fullalove stood and followed Bentley and Anya and Chloe. Plant followed Fullalove.

'What a waste of an evening,' Plant said as they drove away.

'Interesting, though,' Fullalove said.

'Really?'

'Fills in the picture.'

'How?'

'Interesting that Bentley didn't lose it. Can you imagine any other best-selling spy novelist putting up with that? They'd have gone ape.'

'So?'

'So maybe he isn't a best-seller. Maybe he's used to this sort of thing. Dud events.'

'He is.'

'How do you know?'

'From what he said to Turner. Turner was ribbing him about how many sales he'd make tonight. Or how few. And according to Bentley the point of it is the internet promotion, not the event itself. You might get a good turn out or a bad turn out...'

'Or no turn out at all.'

'Or no turn out at all. But it's all irrelevant compared to the internet exposure. That's what matters. Or so Bentley claims. And it makes sense. Once the event's posted up there with the book up there, it's potentially global. Potentially. Advertising the existence of your book day after day. In theory. Letting people know it exists and that you're an invited guest somewhere but it doesn't matter where, what matters is that the book exists and that it's out there being promoted. Somewhere. And that's promoting it, that's the point of it. Not the handful of people that turn up to a reading or a signing or a pathetic excuse for a festival. But the people who see it mentioned on the internet. And then they go and buy it. Hopefully.'

'Could be,' Fullalove agreed. 'In theory, as you put it. And none of it verifiable. If he's up there on the web it looks like he's real, a real writer, with real sales. Doesn't matter whether anyone ever registers it or takes any notice or even buys the book. But it keeps up the illusion.'

‘What illusion?’

‘That anyone actually reads his books. He’s got half a dozen or more novels, none of them best-sellers, but nevertheless they keep on appearing, thanks to what? A loyal readership? Or a good agent? Or some deal done somewhere or other, best not ask where but have a guess.’

‘And what’s the point?’

‘To give him credibility as a novelist.’

‘Which you’re saying he doesn’t actually have.’

‘Exac’ly.’

‘But he’s a publisher anyway.’

‘And what credibility does he have as a publisher?’

‘No idea.’

‘Exac’ly.’

‘Ted Kelly must have thought he had some. Maybe he hoped Bentley would publish him in the U.K. as *quid pro quo* for putting him on the programme. Presumably that’s why he invited him.’

‘Could be. If he invited him.’

‘You’re saying he didn’t.’

‘Bentley could have scoured the internet and seen the festival was on and invited himself.’

‘Can you invite yourself?’

‘If Kelly thinks he can get himself published in the U.K. by accepting Bentley’s generous offer to appear, the answer is probably yes.’

‘But you’re saying Bentley doesn’t have publishing credibility either.’

‘No idea. Just speculating. Probably not. But if you’re in Kelly’s situation, what have you got to lose?’

‘So what credibility does Bentley have?’

‘I wouldn’t give him any,’ Fullalove said.

‘So why’s he here, what’s he up to?’ Plant asked.

‘Some dirty business or other, you can be sure. The festival was obviously just convenient cover.’

‘Oh no, you’re not going to say he came out here to burn Turner down. He’d have done a better job than that, surely.’

‘Maybe he wasn’t trying to burn him down. Just burn Redman’s books.’

‘Why would he want to do that?’

‘Don’t ask me. I thought you’d been hired to find that out.’

‘I doubt that it was Bentley.’

‘So why’s he out here just when it happens?’

‘Coincidence.’

‘No one believes in coincidence. Especially not you.’

‘True,’ Plant agreed. ‘But I still can’t see the connection. If there is one.’

‘Of course there is,’ Fullalove said. ‘You’ve just got to find it.’

Chapter 17

Angela Dark may have refused to run any of Redman’s pieces in *News from the Dark Side*, indeed she definitely did refuse. But she let Redman burst into print with an interview. Digital print, anyway. Burst forth, whether ink was involved or not. Angela had given him his head. A generous spread. So generous that a less foolhardy individual than Redman might have suspected something. So much space in which to reveal and express himself. To tell his story at last. He seized the opportunity in full heroic mode, the charge of the Light Brigade into instant annihilation.

‘If you are a dying white Anglo-Saxon protestant heterosexual male,’ he announced, ‘you might as well say what you believe, unfashionable as it might be, since you’ll get no favourable coverage, no considered reviews, no positive mentions, so there’s no need to try to be subtle or discreet, you’re fucked anyway.’

It was one of those classic, self-fulfilling prophecies.

Redman’s interview was nothing if not provocative. Confrontational. His response to the burning of his books inflammatory. It was a retrospective remark on the rise of the women’s movement that inevitably drew fire. He argued that the consequences of the movement’s emergence was the destructive split of the left into two factions that became increasingly

incompatible: men versus women. In a development of the old British Raj policy of divide and rule for controlling India, the progressive forces ended up divided into two, and the ensuing gay liberation movement served to divide the two factions yet again, so that there was no longer any united radical agenda or action.

'Fair enough,' Fullalove agreed. 'I've always said the CIA was behind it all.'

'You say the CIA is behind everything.'

'Most things.'

'It's not what Redman says.'

'Not hard to deduce, though, is it? Someone was behind it. Maybe he's being cautious.'

'I don't see any signs of that,' Plant said. 'Now he's gone and provoked the feminists and the gays. There's a whole attack on him in the latest *News from the Dark Side*.'

'Good old Angela,' Fullalove said, a happy, evil smile spreading across his unshaven stubble. 'She knows how to keep a story running. Pity there aren't any books in print to benefit from the publicity. It's always the way with publishing. When you finally get the publicity the books are no longer available. He could have been selling sheds full with all that attention if Turner had reprinted.'

News from the Dark Side got full value out of Redman's interview. The outrage that book burning could provoke amongst its readership was as nothing to the outrage that Redman's remarks on the women's movement generated in the following issue. Somehow *News from the Dark Side* had acquired a copy of *Illiberal Liberals*. Redman must have given one of his six author's copies to Angela in the hope no doubt of some favourable editorial treatment. Maybe he'd handed over more than one copy. Or maybe the one copy had been ripped apart into its component parts. Or maybe he'd sent her a PDF of it, and she'd circulated it to various of her contributors.

A team of reviewers dissected every chapter in devastating detail. Every unconscious patriarchal assumption embedded in his not especially elegant prose was unearthed and displayed. Every male supremacist tic in his unawakened, unexamined word hoard was revealed. His explicit sexist assumptions were dealt with easily enough. And the full richness and complexity of his world view was excavated to devastating effect. Negativity to women, gays and minorities was discovered paragraph by paragraph. True enough, he was negative about

pretty well everything, but that did not concern the reviewers. They had their agenda. With which they trounced Redman enthusiastically and unmercifully.

Plant was sitting around not doing much at all when Mac Arber phoned with the first intimations of something happening.

'Your fiery friend seems to be spreading himself around.'

'What fiery friend?'

'Adam Redman.'

'No friend of mine.'

'Client, then.'

'Not a client, either.'

'So you're not in regular contact with him?'

'Not at all.'

'Ah well, probably for the best. You wouldn't want all the feminists he's stirring up coming down on you, would you.'

'Preferably not. Just reading the response to his interview in *The Dark Side* was bad enough. You saw that, I imagine.'

'More than that, I just saw the man himself.'

'Poor you. Where?'

'Here.'

'Here? There?'

'Yes.'

'In your shop?'

'He's been buying some interesting books.'

Mac Arber hated it being called a shop. But buying and purchasing and otherwise handing over money were acceptable. The tone he strove for was that of High Art. The marriage of music and literature. Today it had been set with Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* playing in the background, and a copy of Byron's *Childe Harold* or collected works on the counter no doubt. Beside the cash register.

'Lucky you. Business booms. What sort of books?'

'What sort indeed?'

‘I asked first.’

‘Well,’ Mac said, lowering his voice, as if to impart some purloined classified information, ‘it looks like he might be in the early stages of a conversion.’

‘A conversion? What, the path to Rome?’

‘To classic feminism.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘So, to be honest, do I. But those were the books he was seeking out. A veritable library of feminist classics.’

‘Why on earth would he be buying them?’

‘That’s what I wondered.’

‘So you refused to sell them to him? Not a suitable purchaser? Not an appropriate home for them?’

‘I did wonder,’ Mac said. ‘But times are, if not tough, not exactly easy. One cannot afford to make chivalric gestures.’

‘Chivalric?’

Harold strove on in the background.

‘Preserving fair womanhood from attack by dark knights on horseback.’

‘Horseback?”

‘That pathetic bicycle he gets around on. Like he’s some seventeenth-century cavalry commander. Banged the handlebars against my window fit to break it and just left the hideous piece of ironmongery there. If he hadn’t come in and made such a decent purchase I’d have, I don’t know, really... It’s all very disturbing, all this cyclophilia. Rubbing their appendages and orifices into those horrid little hard leather seats. I mean, really, there must be pleasanter ways of accessing pleasure. Why don’t they just grow up and read books? A lot less expensive than those ridiculous machines.’

‘So rather than standing on chivalric principle and refusing to sell him the books, you decided to convert him from cyclophilia by encouraging and condoning bibliophilia.’

‘How beautifully you put it,’ Mac trilled.

‘And you went round the shelves helping him find what he didn’t even know he wanted. Making sure he didn’t miss anything.’

‘It’s the sort of service that a serious customer expects and that I am happy to provide.’

‘And he’s one of your regulars.’

‘No, not at all. Never seen him before.’

‘So how do you know it was him?’

‘From his photographs in *News from the Dark Side*.’

‘Uh huh.’

‘And the name on his credit card.’

‘All right.’

‘And I thought that this might be something you ought to know. Pertinent to your inquiries, I believe the phrase is.’

‘I don’t see how. But thanks anyway.’

‘I don’t see how it’s pertinent either. Except that it seemed somewhat strange. In the context of his interview and the response.’

‘I don’t think it’s going to be a conversion,’ Plant said.

‘No. Nor do I. Not from the somewhat manic glint in his eye.’

‘He always has that. He did anyway, the times I’ve seen him.’

‘And the steely set of his jaw.’

‘That too.’

‘Well, there we are.’

‘Where’s that?’ Plant asked.

Chapter 18

An answer soon came. More fire, more conflagration. It made great viewing, the item ran on every news bulletin for the next twenty-four hours and spread like wildfire across the internet. It was splendid publicity for *News from the Dark Side*. Angela had a new edition out by the next morning complete with video footage.

Street surveillance cameras had caught Redman cycling along the pavement up to the *News from the Dark Side* office in a wavering, laborious way, wobbling uncertainly from the weight of the pannier bags and his back-pack stuffed with the classics of the feminist revolution. No names, no pack drill. But there they were, the standard texts, shaken out of their bags, heaped

up on the pavement, sheets of newspaper crumpled and stuffed amongst them, Redman pouring petrol or kerosene over them from a couple of plastic mineral water bottles, striking matches and igniting them and dropping them and burning his fingers, before setting off a great burst of flame that promptly caught his jacket alight. A couple of onlookers threw him to the ground and rolled him along the pavement to put out the flames on his clothes, as the books blazed away. Great television. Nothing in his life till now had gained Redman such attention on new or old media. Whether he had alerted some of his old contacts in journalism about his intentions in advance and they had been there ready, or whether the footage was taken by random young possessors of mobile phones who happened to be passing by, it was good coverage, even if a bit shaky, but that gave it the requisite verité touch, authenticity as they used to say.

A couple of fire engines came rushing to the scene, sirens howling, lights flashing. And at the same time police arrived. There was some reasonable footage of firemen hosing down the flaming feminist classics. And of Redman chatting to the police and then being led away. All good news fodder. The perils of our streets. Radical extremists. Inferno. The flames of Hell on earth. All on a total fire ban day. Not that Redman's attempts made any significant addition to the thick pall of smoke haze blanketing the city, or contributed to the spread of encircling bush fires. But it would add to the charges levelled against him.

The book burning got Redman his blaze of publicity. Fifteen minutes of flame in the old media. But it was treated with derision by the digital generations – book burning being akin to weird stuff like croquet and knitting and darning and all those ancient, old world practices. So in that milieu, the present milieu, let alone the future, he just looked like some old fogey, embarrassing more than anything else. Who carried around bags of books these days and why would they then go and try to set them alight? And ineffectually, at that? *News from the Dark Side* ran a sequence of photographs of Redman tossing books and papers onto the flames above the caption 'Old Tosser morphs into Neo-Nazi.' It wasn't a good look.

And picking on the feminists to burn their books was guaranteed to provoke a rapid and negative response. If he'd chosen to set fire to a television station he might have become a hero. Burn them for their lousy programming, their endless repeats and reruns. Or the banks, even better, for their money-laundering or for their charging dead people fees. He could have fuelled the flames of anger about the banks, he might even have ended up leading a movement, could have founded a new political party. Or outside an army barracks, now their security had been

contracted out and privatized, so he wouldn't have been confronted by excessive and undue force like tanks armed with depleted uranium war-heads, or troop carriers carrying special forces snipers. Just civilian security guards. And that would have made a point on the television news. Or he could have done it outside parliament house with a bonfire of election manifestoes and policy statements, itemising their broken promises. That would have got mass support for such an expression of popular sentiment.

Plant shook his head at the lost potential, the wantonly missed opportunities. And then for Redman to choose to attack the feminists, what greater self-immolating, career-suicidal strategies could he have adopted? Yes, it got him publicity. And they would certainly be spelling his name right. And never forgetting it.

If they cut off his hands as a punishment it wouldn't really matter. Not career wise. He wouldn't be needing them in order to write anything any more. No one was ever going to publish anything he might ever want to write again. Except people that you would prefer never to publish with.

Now Mac Arber's puzzled phone call about Redman's shopping spree made sense.

'Pity he didn't come to me,' Fullalove said. 'I could have done with some bulk sales. Especially when condition was unimportant. You don't need mint copies if you're going to burn them.'

'But your stock of unacceptable books doesn't include the classics of feminism, surely?'

'Of course not. But I know where I could get them at a good price.'

'And mark them up to sell on.'

'Not excessively,' Fullalove said.

He rolled a joint, kindled fire, lit it, inhaled and exhaled and waved the smoke away from his nose and eyes. 'This could put Redman back in the frame for burning his own books, don't you think?'

'Hard to say,' Plant said. It was hard. Hard to know. Hard to make any sense of. 'Neither burning was at all efficient, so if you're looking for a shared *modus operandi*, you've got one. Utter innate incompetence. But that doesn't limit the possibilities to Redman for the first burning. He's not the only incompetent in that world.'

'Place is full of them,' Fullalove agreed, relaxed in a haze of marijuana in the smoke-laden afternoon, rembetika playing on his old compact disc player, joint smouldering in his hand.

A couple of deep drags and then he passed it across to Plant and was ready to launch into his interpretation of events.

'Fires are this month's hot topic. Interesting synchronicities. There's your warehouse fire, there's your feminist classics, and there's the state of emergency catastrophic bushfires. The fire next time. Incredible.'

Incredible was not a word Fullalove was often heard to utter. Usually he could find a conspiracy that would make things all too credible.

'So what's it all about?' he asked.

'You tell me.'

'I will,' Fullalove assured him, launching forth. 'So, global warming, that's the first thing you hear, the greenies going on about stopping burning coal so we can replace it with atomic energy and produce the necessary by-product for nuclear weapons. So it suits the greenies. Maybe their activists started the fires.'

'Hardly likely,' Plant said.

'Please yourself. Then there's National Parks and Wildlife, dodgy operation, they could be the villains, refusing to burn off because of the environmentalists saying you should leave the undergrowth and fallen branches and trees for bugs and beetles to nest in. So instead of regular burning off which stops catastrophic fires from developing, there's a huge combustible load of stuff just waiting for the inevitable catastrophe. Which really does wonders for the poor old bugs and beetles when it happens.

'And then there's the government maniacally committed to ensuring privatized profit and refusing to sustain public owned operations. They've been closing down fire stations throughout the state. And those that are left are basically run by volunteers. Who the government refuses to pay or compensate for time off work. Recipe for disaster.

'Or you could say it's pyromaniacs. The fire services attract them, they used to give them a psych test to screen them out. Though in some ways it's better to have them in the service and to occupy them in controlled back-burning, rather than running wild out in the community.

'And schoolkids, of course. The government declares an emergency and closes the schools, so the kids are let loose to go out and play and they go rampaging around looking for fun things to do like starting catastrophic bushfires.

'Or it could be none of the above but something even more sinister.'

‘Go on,’ Plant said.

‘How about weapons testing?’

‘What, military exercises out in the bush? Someone would have noticed, surely, you wouldn’t be able to keep that quiet. Someone would hear the noise or see the equipment.’

‘Forget tanks and rocket-launchers and macho men in camouflage and black face. How about laser beams from satellites? Testing to see if they can scorch the earth from space. Hide some targets out in the bush, like they’re Islamic fundamentalists, and then direct laser beams down and zap them.’

‘What, and they missed?’

‘Not necessarily. They could have hit the targets spot on and totalled them, but the flames could have spread. They got too successful. Set fire to the bush as well as the dummy jihadists. Assuming they used dummies. What do you reckon?’

‘So the next thing they’ll be saying is that the fires were started by jihadists,’ Plant offered.

‘I’m surprised they haven’t said it already,’ Fullalove said. ‘And I’m surprised that some young Islamic freedom fighters haven’t gone out there and done their bit and started a few more fires. Why haven’t they? Makes you think that they don’t exist, otherwise they’d be at it, wouldn’t they? Make the most of the conditions, you don’t even have to go on the internet and find out how to make a bomb. Just go out and buy a box of matches or a cigarette lighter and set a bit of bushland alight and then, whoosh. Incandescence. If you were them, wouldn’t you be out there?’

Plant registered annoyance. Instinctively on guard against any incitement to self-incrimination.

‘They have to be on the government payroll.

‘Who?’ Plant asked.

‘The so-called terrorists. If there were any real terrorists around, then there’d be some young hot-heads out there fanning the flames. Have to be. But there obviously aren’t any. So whenever any so-called terrorists pop up, you can just assume that they’re government funded provocateurs. Otherwise they’d have been out there lighting matches and proclaiming the Caliphate. It’s the only explanation that makes any sense. That’s the story you should be

investigating. Not that pathetic little excuse for a warehouse fire. You should be investigating the big picture they're not telling us about.'

Chapter 19

Plant drove over to Paige Turner's to have a chat, check out the reaction there to Redman's piece of street theatre. Maybe it had prompted some new thoughts about the original arson episode. But if it had, there was no one there thinking them. No one was there, except for Chloe.

'Is Turner around?'

She shook her head.

'Is he at home? I wanted to have a word with him.'

'No, I called, he's not answering,' she said, her voice indistinct, hardly any voice at all.

'Any idea where he is??'

'No, he hasn't been in all week.'

She pulled out a couple of tissues from the box on her desk and snuffled into them

'The police arrested him,' she said, ashen faced, struggling through tears and sniffles to say anything at all.

'What, Turner? What for?'

'No, Adam, not Turner. They took him to gaol.'

'Adam Redman? No, he's not in gaol,' Plant assured her. 'They released him after they'd charged him.'

'Still,' she said, in meltdown over Redman's fate, 'they took him away. He could still be sent to gaol. It will ruin his chances of a career. He's so able and all these terrible things keep happening to him.'

'What terrible things?'

'Oh, not having a job. Getting retrenched.'

'Look, it's not a problem,' Plant said. 'Turner can reprint the book, it's not a problem.'

'But it is,' she almost screamed, 'that is the problem.'

'What is?'

'That book, of course.'

‘You think they’ll set fire to it again if it’s reprinted? Whoever they are.’

She just looked at him.

‘It’ll be a disaster. It won’t do him any good at all. Not for the sort of job he ought to have.’

‘Why not?’

‘They’ll take one look at it and turn him down immediately. You can’t write things like that and get away with it.’

‘All the more admirable that he’s written them.’

‘It’s not admirable,’ she said, her lips and cheeks puffy, her eyes red rimmed. ‘It’s suicidal.’

‘Yes, well, I know what you mean. But I don’t think it’s as extreme as that.’

‘It is,’ she said.

Yes, she was probably right, Plant reflected. It probably was.

‘He’ll never get a job again. His whole life is ruined. How’s he going to afford to live without a job? What’s he going to do? Every door’s going to be closed to him. For ever.’

Join the club, Plant almost said. Other people had seen their hopes of journalistic and literary careers turn to ashes before their eyes. Plant had, anyway. But he knew enough to know that Chloe had no spare sympathy for anyone other than herself and Redman. Certainly not for Plant. So he said nothing, withheld his unrequested suggestions for career possibilities, suppressed any assurances that this wasn’t the end of the road, that other people had been down that way before and found a path forward. It wasn’t the occasion to be saying ‘Look at me’ in a chirpy way. She wasn’t going to be looking at anyone, her eyes tight shut in an attempt to hold back her tears.

Her concern for Redman’s fate may have been the concern she would show for any suffering creature. But it may also have been the result of some acquaintance with or knowledge about Redman himself. Which might possibly help build up the picture of what was going on. A possibility certainly worth following up.

‘Can I give you a lift?’ Plant offered.

Maybe she would open up in the car, give him that vital clue that had lain unrecognised, unregarded. It was not that he had any designs on her. Surely not. Or did he make these offers spontaneously and automatically, years of practice, unthought, archaic, no longer acceptable?

‘Why?’ she said.

‘You can hardly breathe outside with all the bushfire smoke.’

‘I’ll be all right.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘I’ve got a car.’

‘Oh, sorry.’

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Why sorry?’

‘Sorry if I seemed intrusive.’

She shook her head and sniffed.

Maybe they could have driven to Bondi, windows tightly closed, air conditioning on, free of the smoke. They could have sat and looked at the beach, the surf, or maybe they could have gone further out towards the Heads, driven up to The Gap and looked across the traditional suicide leap site to New Zealand or Antarctica or wherever, and in the calm and relaxation some memory of Chloe’s would have surfaced, some association would have drifted past, and things would have emerged into clarity. It had been a nice idea to toy with, there were worse ways to spend the late afternoon. And it might have worked.

But it hadn’t.

You’re getting too old for this sort of thing, he told himself as he drove back alone to Fullalove’s. Not even told himself, he wasn’t telling himself anything, thoughts were simply arising, unbidden, unwanted, unwelcome even. Young female persons of the age of Turner’s crackers see someone like you, Plant, as an ageing, unappealing predator, an unregenerate, geriatric groper, you’re too old for this game, the private eye in job description congress with sexually alluring, described in detail and at length, secretary, suspect, witness. Those days are gone.

He parked the car and walked down the street through the increasingly choking bushfire smoke to Fullalove’s hovel, and into the familiar welcoming clouds of marijuana fumes pervading the kitchen.

Chapter 20

Bentley phoned.

'We need to have a talk.'

'Do we?' Plant heard himself saying. Or was it 'Really?'? Something lacking in enthusiasm. He had no wish at all to have a talk with Bentley. But if Bentley said they needed to talk, then maybe they did, whatever Bentley meant by having a talk. What it meant to Plant was that Bentley was acting in a way that might merit, if not investigation, at least some careful attention. If Bentley chose to make this demand in the middle of Plant's inquiries, maybe that suggested that Bentley had something to contribute. Either by what he said or by what he didn't say and by what Plant might deduce. Alternatively he might have nothing to contribute, but a strong desire and intention to suck out any information that Plant might have assembled about the case. Which rather suggested, either possibility, that Bentley had some connection or involvement with the inquiries. Though he might just have been phoning out of curiosity, idle or active. But probably not.

Bentley suggested they meet at the Sydney Flying Squadron at Kirribilli. It sounded somewhat military, some special air services reserve, maybe, and Plant was somewhat apprehensive. He had no wish to be lured into an enhanced interrogation techniques facility. Nor into one of those forbiddingly ultra posh clubs, if there were such, Plant not familiar with the territory, somewhere Bentley could make some status assertion by claiming membership. Maybe not.

It turned out to be be neither gross nor intimidating, however. Accepting rather than forbidding. A sailing club but you didn't have to sail. A pleasant place for lunch. Bentley signed him in and they sat out on the deck overlooking the water. Ferries and cruise liners and tourist excursion boats and the occasional sailing craft criss-crossed the harbour through the smoke haze.

Bentley was in double-breasted navy blazer like Turner, what was it with these chaps, some Britain rules the waves uniform? Naval reserve? Plant didn't ask. Maybe he should have done. Not that Bentley was the sort of chap who gave out much information under questioning, or any other time.

'We've met before.'

‘Yes,’ Plant agreed.

It was the first indication that Bentley remembered. No previous sign of recognition.

‘Least said about that the better,’ Bentley said

Plant gave a nod and grunt of agreement. He had expected some brief chat, gossip, catch up, but Bentley offered nothing further. No small talk.

‘This business of Turner’s fire, what’s it all about?’

Straight to the point.

Plant smiled, the courteous provider of research assistance and investigative reporting.

‘If only I knew.’

‘You’re supposed to be the investigator. If you don’t know, who does?’

‘Who indeed?’ Plant agreed.

‘Someone must.’

‘The person or persons who lit it, presumably.’

‘And who are they?’

‘As I said, if only I knew.’

‘You’re not a lot of use, are you?’

‘Not at the moment, no.’

‘Are you ever going to be?’

‘You sound like my parents,’ Plant said. ‘Time will tell, I guess.’

He smiled his smile of uncooperative cooperativeness.

‘Are you holding out on me?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Presumably because you’ll claim you only report back to whoever it was that hired you.’

‘Well, there is that,’ Plant agreed.

‘So?’

‘So nothing.’

‘So you are holding out.’

‘No. Not at all. There’s just nothing to report so far.’

‘So far?’

‘Things take time,’ Plant said, which was true enough. ‘I’m always hopeful,’ he added, which wasn’t.

‘And in this case?’

‘I honestly don’t know. I can’t see much point to it. If they were going to burn the place down they’d surely have done a better job. Or were they just sending a warning?’

‘What sort of a warning?’

‘No idea. Could be something Turner would understand. Or just some protection racket.’

‘So he’s up to something.’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘You said a warning he’d understand. What do you mean by that?’

‘Just a possibility. I don’t mean anything by it.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t mean anything by it?’

‘I don’t know what it could be about. Turner might know. I don’t.’

‘But he could be up to something, you believe.’

‘He’s a publisher,’ Plant said, hoping it might irritate or provoke Bentley in some way. But Bentley was impermeable.

‘Well you’d better find out what it is he’s been up to.’

‘Maybe. What are you up to, for that matter?’

‘What do you mean, what am I up to?’

‘How can I rephrase it?’

Bentley offered no suggestion.

‘How about, what brings you out here?’ Plant asked.

‘British Airways,’ Bentley said.

‘For what purpose?’

‘None of your business.’

‘Connected to Turner?’

‘Why would I be connected to Turner?’

‘You tell me. You came and visited him.’

‘Old chum from years back.’

‘Chum?’

‘In a manner of speaking. Acquaintance, more like it.’

‘Where?’

‘Where what?’

‘Where did you make his acquaintance?’

‘Oh, here and there.’

‘Here?’

‘Yes.’

‘And there?’

‘U.K.’

‘Asia?’

‘Probably. When you’re in the same business you tend to bump into each other all over the place.’

‘And what business is that?’

‘Publishing, of course.’

‘Ah.’

‘What did you think it was?’

‘No idea,’ Plant said. ‘Just wondering.’

‘Well don’t.’

‘Don’t?’

‘Don’t wonder. Stick to the job in hand.’

‘I thought I was.’

‘No, you were off track.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. That is so.’

It was a particularly unfruitful conversation. Despite Bentley’s suspicions, Plant was not holding out on him. The reality, as Plant said, the truth, was that he had no idea who was behind the fire. He had no information to withhold. But Bentley himself was a different case. Plant had no doubt that Bentley was holding out on him. Which in its very unfruitfulness was paradoxically quite fruitful indeed. Possibly. Without a doubt Bentley was up to something. But whether it was the same something that Turner might have been up to, or even an investigation into what Turner might have been up to if he was up to anything, Plant was unsure. Just as Bentley was unsure as to whether Plant knew more than he was letting on. So they smiled at each other and sank a bottle of white wine as they ate their fish and chips. Or in Bentley’s case no chips, grilled fish

and salad. Health and fitness. Plant went for the battered fish, plus the chips, not wishing to proclaim vegetarianism in front of Bentley, and having an unreconstructed taste for the batter. And just because he was a vegetarian, of a weak-willed sort, admittedly, there was no compulsion to eat salad.

Bentley had ordered a Margaret River white. He was someone who made a point of knowing about wines, and letting you know he knew. And he did know them, clearly. Like so much else. There might have been some degree of affectation and carry on in it, his wine connoisseurship, but so there was about much if not most of his personality. The important thing was that he knew a good wine when he saw it, and ordered it. To Plant's satisfaction, no need to get sniffy about it.

'So you know Turner from being in publishing,' Plant said.

'Got it in one.'

'Have you always been in publishing?'

'Pretty much.'

'Pretty much?'

'Well, not when I was jackarooing.'

'You were a jackaroo?'

'Yes.'

'Here?'

'Where else?'

'Enjoy it?'

'Yes.'

'When was that?'

'Some years back,' he laughed.

'And now?'

'And now what?'

'Still in publishing?'

'Pretty much.'

'So what are you up to here?'

'You already asked me that.'

'And you didn't reply.'

‘Didn’t I?’

‘No’

‘Ah well.’

‘So what are you up to?’

‘Same old thing.’

‘Publishing?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘What, looking up other publishers? Writers?’

‘That sort of thing.’

‘With a view to acquiring them?’

‘What, writers? Are you serious? Can’t understand it myself, why people take so much notice of them. Delusional. Making up these stories and plays and stuff. I mean, what does any of it mean? It’s like hearing voices. Fair enough if that’s what they get off on. But why take any notice of them? That’s what I ask myself.’

‘Aren’t you a writer? Don’t you write those novels?’

Bentley’s eyes lit up.

‘You’ve read them!’ he said.

Plant thought it best not to deny it.

‘Are your books all made up, then?’

‘Ah, can’t tell you that, old sport.’

‘Can’t? Don’t you know?’

‘Official Secrets and all that,’ he said. ‘Not allowed to tell about spy novels. Keep the enemy guessing.’

‘The enemy?’

‘The enemy.’

‘What enemy?’

‘There’s always an enemy. Chaps like that Redman fellow. People who ask too many questions.’

‘I thought he was in the business of giving answers rather than asking questions.’

‘I wasn’t talking about him.’

‘Who did you mean, then?’

‘There you go, you see. One too many questions and there you are. An enemy by anyone’s definition.’

‘Oh,’ Plant said.

If he was now categorised as one of the enemy, nothing was to be lost by asking yet one more question.

‘So you’re not out here to poach someone’s list? Steal their authors?’

‘Whoa, whoa, hold your horses, what’s all this about?’

Plant said nothing.

‘You got me in your sights for something?’

‘Just establishing a context.’

‘Well, you can leave me out of it.’

‘So what are you out here for?’

‘A bit of this, a bit of that. Promoting the novel, as you saw.’

‘A bit of what?’

‘Let’s just say business and leave it at that, shall we?’

‘Business,’ Plant said.

‘This fire,’ Bentley said again.

They went over the possible candidates for starting it. A discontented, dissatisfied author or a would-be-author, no less dissatisfied. Maybe someone rejected or published unsuccessfully. A rival publisher seemed unlikely.

‘Good,’ Bentley said.

‘But not impossible,’ Plant added.

Teenage vandals unconnected with the book trade, always a possibility. Protection racket another possibility, but no evidence, no prior warnings that Plant knew of, so unlikely. Discontented staff.

‘I’d check them out,’ Bentley said. ‘Pretty little things, but that means nothing. You never know.’

And personal enemies of Adam Redman.

‘Sounds like the sort of chap who might have a lot.’

‘Could be,’ Plant agreed.

‘What are the odds on his doing it himself? The author chap. Isn’t he number one suspect? Trigger happy pyromaniac. Professional bloody book-burner. And if he’s not a professional, he’s doing a bloody good job for an amateur.’

‘Not that good a job,’ Plant said. ‘He never got the fire really going, if it was him. The sprinklers cut in at the warehouse. And the fire brigade came to *The Dark Side* before he did any real damage. More death by drowning than burning.’

‘I wouldn’t rule him out, though.’

‘Probably not,’ Plant said; ‘but I don’t think it was him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Talked to him for a while, didn’t get any sense that he’d done it.’

‘But he did that number outside *The Dark Side*.’

‘True.’

‘So?’

‘Not impossible,’ Plant conceded.

‘But you don’t think so.’

‘No.’

Bentley ordered coffee. Two long blacks.

‘Half terrified to ask for them, these days. Sounds like you’re demanding inappropriate sexual favours from indigenes. Ah well.’

They sat there at the harbour’s edge until the wind changed and the smoke from the bushfires encircling the city was swept in, coming over the water like a sea mist at first, then a greyish, blue haze, and the smoke began to catch in the throat and irritate the eyes and nostrils, obscuring the bridge and the opera house, setting off the smoke alarms in the high rise office blocks and precipitating mass evacuations.

‘Let’s get out of this,’ Bentley said.

Not that there was any way of escaping it, it had surrounded and enveloped the city.

‘Talk to you later,’ Bentley said, getting into his BMW.

It could have been friendly. Or it could have been a threat.

Chapter 21

There was no sign of Geoffry Turner. He hadn't called Plant. He hadn't been into the office. Anya and Chloe had both phoned him and got no reply. Anya had driven round to his apartment and said there was no sign of him or his car.

'Probably keeping out of the way of Bentley. Waiting till he moves on. I know I would,' Plant speculated.

'What did Bentley say about it?' Fullalove asked.

'He didn't say anything. Didn't mention it at all.'

'Sounds ominous.'

'Very ominous. No sounds at all. A scrupulous silence.'

'From the man without scruples,' Fullalove said.

'Could be he knows and isn't saying.'

'Or doesn't know, and ditto.'

'But Turner's got a business to run. He can't just not turn up.'

'Could've left the country. Off collecting cookbooks.'

'He wouldn't have gone without telling someone, surely.'

'Like you.'

'Like his staff. Anya or Chloe, he wouldn't just go off without telling them.'

'Seems unlikely,' Fullalove agreed. 'You reckon he might have been abducted?'

'Why?'

'For ransom, maybe.'

'There hasn't been any ransom demand. Not that I've heard of.'

'That could be worrying in itself,' Fullalove said.

'Why?'

'They might already have killed him.'

'We don't even know that he's been kidnapped, let alone killed.'

'Doesn't hurt to speculate.'

'I don't know,' Plant said. 'There's no reason to think anything terrible's happened.'

'What about the fire?'

'You can hardly call that terrible.'

‘What if it’s connected? Some sort or warning or threat. He doesn’t respond like whoever it is wants. So they grab him.’

‘And?’ Plant asked.

‘And whatever. Ransom, torture, death, dismemberment. Or maybe he’s just had enough and disappeared. The fire was the last combustible straw. Not making any money. Business down the tubes.’

‘You don’t know that the business was going bad.’

‘Business is always going bad for publishers. They’re like farmers.’

‘You don’t have to believe them, though.’

‘True.’

‘I don’t know,’ Plant said. ‘I just find it, I don’t know, worrying...’

‘Like you mightn’t get paid?’

‘There’s that, too,’ Plant agreed.

‘The economic base,’ Fullalove declaimed. ‘Always good to get a chance to give the old slogans an airing.’

Plant carried on checking out various of Paige Turner’s authors for want of any further instructions or any better idea of what to do. It was hardly a systematic check, over the years there had been so many authors. He focussed on the more recent of them, authors with books published in the last two or three years. It was still a lot of books. For all its modest premises, Paige Turner pumped out a fair amount of product. No obvious suspects emerged. A few anecdotes, a few funny stories, a few moans and groans about insufficient publicity and inadequate marketing and neglect and exclusion by the reviewing media. All the usual and expected complaints. But nothing to suggest any of the complainants had thought of kindling fire and burning books. Not to have spoken to them would have been remiss, but it was a time-consuming process and delivered nothing of any significance.

He called in at the office after another unfruitful day. Anya was there alone, her feet up on the desk, reading a book. She put them down as soon as Plant came in, feet and book, all three. He picked up the book from the desk.

‘One of Bentley’s novels, hey?’

She smiled.

‘It’s rather good, actually. It’s all about potentially traitorous dissidents being tracked down and monitored by the secret service. It’s very convincing. He knows his stuff.’

‘What sort of dissidents? More terrorists again?’

‘No, no, it’s quite refreshing. It’s discontented lower class intellectuals it seems, people like, well, people like poor old Adam Redman really, you know? The main character reminds me of him. Well, not the main character, that’s the spook, but the main dissident he’s tracking down is just like Adam Redman, says the same sort of things.’

Could Bentley have burned Redman’s books? Plant wondered. Surely he wouldn’t have flown out from the UK specially to do that. Or would he?

‘Is Turner around?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she said, ‘he hasn’t been in for a while.’

‘Is he out of town?’

‘Could be.’

‘Or down at his farm.’

‘I don’t think so. I gave him a call there.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. No one answered. I left a message but he hasn’t called back.’

Plant lowered himself into one of the chairs. Uninvited. But it was hot and unbearable outside in the street. Those with breathing problems or heart conditions were told to stay inside away from the acrid smoke. Plant had no wish to venture out into it again. And he needed to have a chat to Anya sometime to complete his interviewing of everybody connected with Paige Turner. Even though they knew nothing, had no idea, weren’t there at the time the fire started.

No attempt is made to describe her. Not in these politically correct days. Prohibited desires. Unacceptable observations. Inappropriate responses. Unutterable words. Leave it to the reader. Much easier for the novelist now than at any time in the past. Dispense with descriptive detail. Ignore fashion guides and make-up artist and hair stylist and costume designer and shoemaker. A great relief in many ways. Certainly the safest option. Just give the name. Anya. There it is.

Plant focussed his attention.

‘I ought to have a look at the farm some time.’

‘Looking for clues?’ she said, it could have been naively or it could have been ironic, smiling at him blandly there.

‘Check out a few things. I could make sure he’s all right. He could be ill. Heart attack. Snake bite.’

‘I don’t think he’s there. He usually says when he’s going. I just phoned on the off chance.’

‘Sure. But since I need to go there, maybe this would be a good time. He could be lying in a coma unable to answer the phone.’

‘All right, all right,’ she said, ‘spare me the gruesome details.’

Anya seemed much more outgoing than Chloe, much less guarded. If he asked her where the farm was and how to get there, there was the possibility that she might tell him.

She did.

‘Want to come for a drive in the country?’ he asked, heady with success.

‘Thanks but no thanks,’ she said.

He gave a smile and a nod of acceptance. Message received.

‘It was a nice thought, though,’ she added.

He asked her about Turner, about Redman, about publishing, about anything she might know or remember or have observed or suspect.

‘You’re just after my mind, aren’t you?’ she said.

Maybe he was being a bit remorseless in his questioning, maybe more than a bit. But he had only been trying to keep focussed on the job and not get distracted, not a good historical moment to get distracted by feminine youth and beauty and the rest of it. Any coals of passion or embers of lust demanded prompt damping down.

‘You’re not interested in my body after all. You’re just pretending it’s sex you’re after when what it really is is you’re trying to hack into my brain. You think I know something about the fire. Or about Adam Redman. Or his book. But the truth is, I don’t know anything about any of it. So, disappointed Mr Plant, off you go, you don’t have to struggle any more and pretend you have any personal interest.’

But he was interested, of course. Yes, he was interested in her mind insofar as she might know anything pertinent to inquiries, as the phrase went. But that didn’t exclude a potential interest in the rest of her. But you could never admit to anything like that any more. Don’t be

fooled. True, he had been intent on pursuing inquiries. He had been attempting to probe if not to hack into her mind. But he was pretty certain there was nothing there of any relevance to the case in hand. Nothing about the fire. Lots about other things he wasn't concerned with, no doubt. Clothes. Music. Art. Life. Books. Movies. Celebrities. Food. Family. Take your pick. Usual stuff. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with any of it. Just not what he was looking for.

As for her body, he'd tried to keep his thoughts about that to himself. Unexpressed. No wish to get put on trial about them. And all he'd achieved by his efforts and suppressions was to alienate her by his calculated unresponsiveness.

'You've got the hots for Chloe, is that it? Gentlemen prefer blondes but you've got a thing for redheads?' she taunted him. 'Or is it all that compassion and care for the world she emanates. You fell for that, did you? The virtue-signalling virgin.'

'Is she?'

She gave what used to be called a wicked grin. Maybe still called that.

'Ah, now you're interested. Good luck with that. Like getting blood into a stone.'

She tugged at the neckline of her t-shirt, pulling it out and down a bit, letting in cooling air in the hot afternoon, or stirring up Plant, simmering uncomfortably there.

Plant was inevitably suspicious. Wary. Both of them wary. Was she really flirting? Or trying to find out what, if anything, Plant knew just as he'd been trying to find out if she knew anything. She was as naturally wary of older men as Plant was of young women. He mightn't think of himself as old, but he was certainly older than her. And the days of innocence were long gone. All a conspiracy of the sex industry, Fullalove speculated. Make male-female relationships so fraught that the only safe sex was to be found by buying it. The triumph of capitalism. The market place the model for human society. Anything else rendered too risky, too toxic, unseemly looking, unwelcome touching, forbidden words, inappropriate suggestions, unacceptable proposals. Cash values only.

She did the fixing up her lipstick number, taking it from her purse beside her on the desk, dab, dab, moue, pout, smile, and back into the purse.

'How do you become an investigator?' she asked. 'Do you have to do a course?'

'It just sort of happened. Other things dried up, like journalism, writing, so...'

'How natural and spontaneous,' she said.

Was mockery a form of flirtation? Or just an expression of contempt?

‘So you gave up writing. Why?’

‘It gave me up. No money in it.’

‘Doesn’t seem to stop the people we get here.’

‘Maybe they’ve got day jobs.’

‘Isn’t being an investigator a day job? Or do you do your best work at night?’

She looked across at him, suggestively. But suggesting what? Lasciviousness? Hilarity? Or nothing at all?

In the old days he would have replied on cue, ‘Do you want to find out?’ Now you just said nothing. If you valued your life, liberty and the rest of it. He said nothing.

‘Oh, aren’t we coy all of a sudden.’

He risked a nod. Though non-verbal communication had become pretty dangerous too.

‘Maybe you’ll get back to it.’

‘Back to what?’

‘Back to writing, of course. Or did you think I meant sex?’

‘Why would you think I’d think you meant that?’

‘Night work,’ she said.

‘Oh.’

‘Night work if you can get it,’ she giggled.

It was probably fun if you were the sort of person who enjoyed fencing. Or the cut and thrust of debate. But it had that edge of danger that Plant would rather have done without. He had no wish to be cut. Or thrusted. Thrust. Stabbed. Sliced. Any of it.

‘I’ve embarrassed you,’ she said. Not without a degree of satisfaction.

‘No, no.’

‘Yes, yes.’

What did you say to that? Plant chose to say nothing once again.

‘You’re a funny old thing,’ she said. ‘Do you solve many cases?’

‘Once in a while,’ he said.

‘And this one? Is this going to be solved in a while, or is it lost in time and space?’

‘We’ll see.’

‘But will we?’

‘One way or another.’

‘That’s a healthy philosophical attitude to have,’ she said.

‘I think so,’ Plant agreed.

Anya was certainly more communicative than Chloe, more cooperative in providing information. She gave Plant details of the farm, where it was, how to get there, how to find it. Even though she turned down his invitation to go there with him. Maybe she couldn’t take the day off. Fair enough. But it was late afternoon now. If he sat around much longer she’d be shutting up the office. In the past he might have suggested having a drink after work.

He sat there undecided, not wanting to invite yet another refusal, uncertain how to interpret their exchange, doubtful that there was going to be an appropriate moment, yet still hanging on. He’d still not popped the question, as it were, when heavy footsteps sounded on the iron stairway up from the warehouse area, and Bentley entered, all smiles and bonhomie. And took her out.

Well, it took a fraction longer than that. She had to lock her desk. Adjust the blinds. Check her handbag, turn off the air-conditioning. While Bentley stood smiling in the doorway, jingling his keys, not exactly impatiently, but making it clear he was ready to go. And to take her with him.

Plant left with them and waved goodbye. Was she so readily available and he had missed the cues? Or was she an old flame of Bentley’s? Or was she taking advantage of Bentley’s visit to make herself available for a new job, was she planning to jump ship from Paige Turner to one of Bentley’s operations, whatever they might be?

Whatever it was, Plant had to concede that it was all rather disappointing.

Chapter 22

Fullalove, on the other hand, unlike Anya, had been most eager to visit the farm, ever since Plant had mentioned its existence. Nothing else to do, have a day out in the country, smoke a few joints, get the feel of the place, you never know, there could be another warehouse fire, maybe.

‘And how do we get there?’ Plant had asked.

‘Drive.’

‘Where to?’

‘Ask at the office.’

‘And they’ll say they can’t give out the address.’

‘Of course. But if you don’t know how to get round that little problem then you’re in the wrong line of work.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Just a personal opinion.’

And Fullalove was right, it had been an easy little problem to get round, Plant had simply asked at the office and Anya had told him how to get there, even if declining to accompany him. But there was no reluctance to go with him on Fullalove’s part, ready at once, immediately, any time, let’s go, eager to bliss out on a drive in the country, groove on the trees and cattle and things, get out of the city for a change, something that always surprised Plant about Fullalove, Fullalove the terminally urbanized city dweller, yet with these atavistic desires for the country, why? how?

‘As long as you don’t smoke in the car,’ Plant said.

‘Oh, man, that’s the whole point, having a joint and getting into it, birds and trees and cattle and stuff.’

‘Get stoned before we leave.’

‘Sure, of course, naturally, but you need to top up.’

‘I don’t, I’m driving.’

‘Well, I’m a passenger, I do.’

‘Tough. I don’t want to get busted.’

‘Chicken. No one does. But you can’t let fear of that ruin your life.’

‘It is not a matter of fear, it’s a matter of practical common sense.’

‘So boring.’

‘Maybe. It’s your choice.’

‘Choice? What choice? You’re not giving me any choice.’

‘Up to you.’

‘Maybe we can stop a couple of times and stoke up.’

‘You can have a smoke when we get there.’

‘I never doubted that for a moment, but...’

‘Good. So we’re agreed.’

‘So why the farm?’ Fullalove asked.

‘Because it’s there...’

‘Like Everest. Fair enough.’

‘...and there are no other leads.’

‘Not because you think someone might be trying to burn it down.’

‘They could be. Who knows?’

‘Clearly not you.’

‘There might be something there.’

‘Like a clue?’ Fullalove said, it could have been derisively.

‘What sort of a clue?’

‘Ah well, as you put it so pertinently, who knows?’

Plant said nothing.

‘What about Turner?’ Fullalove asked. ‘Don’t you reckon it’s odd that Turner disappears as soon as Bentley arrives.’

‘I’m not sure it was as soon as he arrived.’

‘Close enough.

‘Maybe he’s just avoiding him. Lying low till he goes.’

‘Maybe Bentley’s bumped him off.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘Well, that’s what we don’t know.’

Plant made dismissive noises.

‘You don’t think it’s an interesting coincidence?’ Fullalove persisted.

Turner’s last words the last time Plant saw him rose up from wherever such things rise up from.

‘I don’t believe in coincidences,’ Turner had said.

‘Who does?’ Plant had asked.

It was a three hour drive south down the coast, intermittent smoke haze drifting across the road and reducing visibility.

‘It’s like the Pacific Coast Highway in those 1940s Hollywood movies,’ Fullalove said, approvingly, the land falling steeply away from the road down to the pounding surf.

Plant followed Anya’s directions. They were clear and easy to follow. She had not been leading him astray, as Fullalove speculated she might have been.

‘Well, you never know,’ Fullalove said. ‘You take an awful lot on trust.’

‘Unlike you,’ Plant said, aiming for a withering tone.

‘Unlike me,’ Fullalove agreed.

The farm was screened from the road by bush and a great stand of bamboo.

‘Looks like something he brought back from one of his Asian trips,’ Fullalove speculated.

‘I think it’s been there a lot longer than that,’ Plant said, from the depths of his rural experience.

An old milk churn lying horizontally on a wooden support served as a letter box and displayed the lot number. An unsurfaced track led up from the gate. Plant opened the combination lock with the number Anya had given him and drove in. The bush opened up to a stretch of cleared grassland and a house, an old weatherboard structure, and to one side of it a large timber shed or barn. There was no sign of any livestock. No sign of any motor vehicle.

The house stood there silent, no sound of voices speaking or singing or shouting or anything, no sound of radio or television or music, no smoke from the chimney, no light in a window, no signs of occupation. The doors were locked. Plant took out the key ring Anya had given him but none of the keys fitted the lock. They peered through the windows. There were no signs of Turner or anyone inside. No lifeless body lying there as far as they could see. Sawn and split logs stacked along one side of the veranda, boxes of kindling and a basket of fir-cones, natural firelighters, beside them. Sheltered from rain and easy enough to reach from inside the house for winter fires. But something of a risk in the summer bush fire season, surely? They walked down the side and round the back of the house. There was a corrugated iron rainwater tank, fed from the guttering. There was a back door, but it too was locked and none of the keys fitted it.

They walked over to the shed. Locked, too. No appropriate key on the key-ring. No windows to see through. More sawn timber stacked beside it.

‘That was a clever one,’ Fullalove said, ‘giving you the wrong keys.’

‘Could be a mistake,’ Plant said.

‘Brilliant.’

Plant looked around, grass, gum trees, more gum trees. The smoke from the bushfires was thicker here than in the city, but the sun still shone through. A crow cawed derisively. Plant tended to agree. A fruitless journey. But what had he expected to find? A smoking ruin? Turner on the brink of death, or already passed over? It had been a journey with no clear aim. Except for spending a day in the country. A change for Fullalove. But all in all rather pointless.

‘How about this?’ Fullalove called out.

At one end of the shed was a second rainwater tank, at the other a large, metal incinerator.

‘What do you reckon that’s for?’

‘For burning stuff, I imagine,’ Plant said. ‘He doesn’t want to start a bush fire with flying embers from a bonfire.’

‘What would he be burning, though?’

‘Rubbish, twigs, leaves, bark. Stuff you can’t use for the house fire but you need to clear away.’

‘A bit heavy duty for that, isn’t it?’

‘Lantana, maybe,’ Plant said, having burned a lot of lantana up at his lantana farm. ‘Keeps it contained. Saves starting a bushfire.’

It was a substantial piece of equipment. But maybe that was the standard size they came in. Plant had no knowledge of the dimensions of incinerators, large, small or standard.

‘How about this, then?’ Fullalove called out again, poking around in the cinders of the incinerator. ‘Looks like somebody’s been doing some more of your book burning.’

He wiped a hand across his face, smearing it with black streaks of ash. With the other hand he held up a wedge of flaking, charred paper.

‘It’s not *my* book burning,’ Plant said, not without some irritation.

‘Your case, mate.’ He waved his spoils in the air. ‘Interesting, don’t you reckon? And a bit more efficient too, by the look of it. Look,’ he said, parting the blackened, crumbling flakes and revealing the unburned, white remains of the pages of a book. Fragmentary words and numbers survived.

‘What is it?’ Plant asked.

‘Have a guess.’

‘No idea.

‘A cookbook.’

‘A cookbook?’

‘No less.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Lists of ingredients and spices and weights and measures, what else could it be?’

‘Why would someone want to burn a cookbook?’

‘Or many cookbooks,’ Fullalove said. ‘There’s more than one, given the amount of ash. Is this your arsonist again?’

‘Well whoever it is is only burning books, not trying to burn the whole place down. This time they put them in the incinerator.’

‘Maybe that was what they were up to at the warehouse. Just targeting the books.’

‘And forgetting they were inside a warehouse and might set fire to the building. You reckon?’

Fullalove walked over to the car and put the charred remnants of cookbook into a plastic bag in the boot. There were always plastic bags and cardboard boxes in the boot, not exactly sterile evidence bags, but adequate enough.

‘Damaged books, maybe?’Plant suggested.

‘Don’t they usually get pulped?’

‘Easier to burn them here than truck them somewhere, maybe?’

‘Maybe. But there again, maybe not.’

Plant brooded on it as they walked back to the house, and came to no conclusion. There might be no connection at all between the warehouse fire and the incinerator. And if there was an incinerator available at the farm, why set fire to the books in the warehouse and risk burning the place down? It made no sense at all. None of it made any sense.

Without keys they could do little. They looked through the windows of the house again and detected nothing sinister, suggestive, revelatory or anything at all, just a house in the country with chairs and tables and beds and stuff, like any other house. They sat in a couple of canvas chairs out on the veranda and Fullalove produced a joint and lit it and shared it and it was a

relaxed afternoon in the country. A blue wren fluttered around the bushes nearby. The crow carried on cawing from somewhere behind them in the uncleared bush. The cicadas clattered away like a thousand industrial spinning looms. Fullalove spat on an old tissue from his pocket and wiped the sooty smears from his face. Most of them. The rest he spread around his cheeks and forehead. He looked like he'd just returned from some special forces night operation, camouflaged up to the whites of his eyes.

And then there was the sound of a vehicle approaching and a top of the range black BMW drove up the track with Bentley at the wheel and Anya beside him. They parked beside Plant's modest white Hyundai and got out. Anya raised a hand and waved a bunch of keys at them.

'Thought you might need these.'

'Ah,' said Plant.

'I gave the wrong keys to you yesterday.'

'So you did.'

'Well here they are. The right ones.'

She waved them at him again, but didn't hand them over.

Bentley locked the BMW and joined them on the veranda.

'Nice spot,' he said, approvingly. 'Perfect location for a dirty weekend. And a jolly tax-minimisation investment too. Splendid. I think I might take a break here.'

'A break from what?' Anya asked, provocatively.

Bentley groaned.

'No one knows how hard I work all the time.'

'No, I'm sure they don't,' Anya agreed, laughing.

'A break from a vacation, that's what you're thinking, I can read you. If only people knew.'

'What sort of work?' Fullalove asked.

'Work is work,' Bentley said.

'Did you find what you were looking for?' Bentley asked Plant.

'Not a thing,' Fullalove cut in.

Plant took the hint, said nothing about the charred book fragments.

‘I didn’t know what I was looking for,’ he said. ‘And without the keys to the house or the shed, I couldn’t look anyway.’

‘Ah well, then you won’t have been disappointed if you didn’t find anything. Did you find anything?’

‘No,’ Plant said. ‘I wasn’t, I didn’t.’

Fullalove grooved away on wild nature, chlorophyll laden grass, distant trees, the soft cooing of a dove, bliss was it in that afternoon to be half asleep. Just stay quiet, Plant instructed him telepathically, hoping that the dope had made Fullalove susceptible to remote control, or at least to receiving messages. Stay cool, Fullalove transmitted back, whatever you say, say nothing.

‘So, a wasted trip,’ Bentley persisted.

Plant shrugged.

He could have said, just getting the feel of things. He could have said, every detail is important. Instead he said nothing.

Bentley said nothing either, surrounding it with an air of comparatively heavy menace. It was something he was clearly good at doing. Fullalove watched him with undisguised interest and amusement, as potentially unnerving in their effect as Bentley’s menacing number. Plant looked across at Anya and smiled. Winningly was the way it used to be described, assuming he had got it right.

‘So let’s go in, shall we?’ she said, turning a key in the door.

Plant gave the house a quick look over, Anya showing him round, kitchen, bedroom, bedroom, study, bathroom, back to kitchen. There were no piles of burned books, no disposable cigarette lighters, no boxes of matches or stacks of firelighters or cans of kerosene, nothing obviously scorched or singed.

‘Better be off then,’ he said, mission completed.

‘Stay for tea,’ Bentley called out.

‘No thanks, we need to get moving.’

‘No you don’t,’ Bentley said. ‘Stay for tea.’

It was less an invitation than a command.

‘Sit yourselves down,’ he ordered.

What did tea mean? Was it the genteel afternoon tea of scones and strawberry jam? Or the rural evening meal, the main meal of the day, meat and two veg? Or maybe high tea, somewhere between the two? Were they about to be grilled along with the sausages? Which did Bentley mean? Why would he announce tea?

Because that was what it was. A teapot, tea cups, and powdered milk. He hadn't stopped to buy fresh milk on the way, let alone scones and jam. Tea bags in the teapot, not even leaf tea.

They sat round the traditional kitchen table in the typical country kitchen.

'I'll be mother,' Bentley said, pouring out the tea and passing the cups around.

Fullalove made no offer of an accompanying smoke. Which was a relief to Plant. Not that Fullalove was ever unnecessarily generous in sharing his dope. Plant was shaken enough by seeing Bentley and Anya turn up. No point in sharing your secret addictions with them.

And why had they come? If Anya had known they were going to be coming down, she could have suggested that Plant come with them. Even though she had already declined to visit with Plant. He did not believe for a moment that she could have given him the key to the gate and forgotten the keys to the house and shed. Except by intention. And he found it hard to believe that she and Bentley had now come especially to bring the keys she had forgotten to give him. Unless they wanted to be there to see whatever it was he wanted to see when he looked for it. And he didn't know what that was.

'So what were you up to here?' Bentley asked.

'Just looking around.'

'Looking for what?'

'Like I said, I didn't know.'

'But you don't deny you were snooping around.'

'No.'

'What do you mean, No?'

'I mean I don't deny it. We were.'

'Were what?'

'Snooping around, as you put it.'

'For what?'

'For whatever we might find.'

'And what did you find?'

‘Nothing.’

‘And you?’ Bentley asked Fullalove. ‘Who are you anyway?’

‘Nah, nothing,’ Fullalove agreed. ‘Nothing, I already said, didn’t find anything. Name’s Fullalove, incidentally.

Bentley gave them his interrogator’s death stare.

‘It would’ve been remiss not to have checked the place out,’ Plant said. ‘It’s obviously part of the business, it’s got a warehouse space so since the other warehouse had a fire in it, it seemed only sensible to check this one out.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. It’s still standing. I haven’t got keys so I haven’t looked inside. But it hasn’t burnt down. I didn’t expect to find anything and I didn’t. Just a routine check. But it had to be done. Process of elimination.’

It sounded quite professional put like that.

‘If you’ve got the keys maybe I could have a quick look round the shed now,’ he added.

He waited to see if Bentley or Anya showed any signs of resistance. They didn’t.

‘I’ll show you now,’ Bentley said, getting up.

They walked across to the barn, Plant, Fullalove, Anya and Bentley, the cicadas making such a racket that no one tried to talk above them. Bentley seemed to have taken on the role of tour guide. Was this just his innate, unthought, male supremacist engagement with the world? Or did Anya have reason to defer to his management style?

Boxes of books were ranged on pallets against the walls, draped with protective sheeting. The floor was swept clean. There were no signs of fire or flood. No signs of anything. Just sealed boxes and a packing bench. Bentley stood in the doorway jingling the keys as Plant and Fullalove nosed around, raising the sheeting, checking out the boxes.

‘Just books,’ Bentley said, dismissively. ‘Unsold stock. Bad decisions.’

His voice registered impatience, come on, get on with it, and out of here.

‘Satisfied?’ he asked.

They weren’t. The only one satisfied was Bentley, waiting there with unconcealed amusement at their own lack of satisfaction.

‘So what game is it you think Turner was up to?’ Bentley asked, back in the house, going over to the kettle on the stove and topping up the teapot with hot water, all casual, genial host mode for the moment.

‘I don’t know that he was up to anything,’ Plant said.

‘So why were you nosing around?’

‘Like I said, seeing if anyone had tried to start a fire here, or anything.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing.’

‘But he was up to something.’

‘Was he? Why would I know?’

‘Because you’re supposed to know things, Mr Private Eye, that’s why he hired you, or had you forgotten?’

‘He hired me to find out who set fire to some books in his warehouse.’

‘Really? Don’t tell me that’s all it was. There’s more to it than that.’

‘Not that he told me.’

‘Why don’t I believe you?’

‘I don’t know why you don’t, and I don’t know what you’re getting at about Turner being up to things, he wasn’t getting up to anything except publishing that I know of.’

He stopped. It seemed enough. No need to add ‘So there.’

It didn’t satisfy Bentley. He turned to Fullalove.

‘What about you?’

‘Me? I’m just helping out my old mate here, keeping him company. Just checking out the place hadn’t burnt down. What about you? Where were you when the books got torched?’

It was a shrewd prod. Bentley had been gradually approaching the incendiary stage. Spontaneous combustion, assuming such exists, was imminent. He snorted, which was no answer, and stood up from the table. He went across to the stove and took the kettle to the sink and filled it up. Now for the water torture.

It was, Plant reflected, momentarily free from Bentley’s questions, strange behaviour. Bentley obviously believed that something was going on, something other than the incineration of Redman’s book, something that Turner was up to. It was all very puzzling. Maybe Turner was indeed up to something. But it wasn’t any of Plant’s business. He wondered if it was any of

Bentley's business, either. Though Bentley's questioning seemed to suggest that Bentley at least thought that it was.

Plant and Fullalove headed back up the coast to Sydney. It was unclear whether Bentley and Anya were staying at the farm. Plant could hardly ask. Well, he could. But he preferred not to know the expected answer, would have preferred to put it right out of his mind. And would have done, except that Fullalove latched onto it.

'What do you reckon, they're having it off, or he's going to pounce on her later, or vice versa for that matter, is it consensual, or if not, which of them is the predator?'

'Shut up, Fullalove,' was Plant's response.

It had no effect.

'That BMW,' Fullalove said, 'it would have to be a hire car, he wouldn't have his own vehicle stashed away here, not even him. Obviously hired it to impress her. Cheapskate.'

'Why cheapskate? It would have been top of the price range to hire.'

'No it wouldn't. A Bentley would have been top. Why didn't he get really impressive? Hire the car to match his distinguished name? After all, they're all made by the Germans. As inauthentically British as he is.'

'Why do you keep saying he's inauthentically British?'

'Everything about him is inauthentic. He tries too hard.'

'Why on earth would he rent a black vehicle in the middle of a heat wave?'

'Political correctness,' Fullalove said. 'If you ask for a white car you get tagged as a racist. You get flagged. Probably reported to the race relations tribunal. Sales of white vehicles are at an all time low. You should trade yours in as soon as you can.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'Doesn't mean it's not true.'

Plant made a grunt of dismissal. 'What was he up to, going up to the farm, anyway?' he asked.

'Sexual congress, they used to call it.'

'I'm not talking about that.'

'Well you wouldn't, would you?'

'Why wouldn't I?'

‘Looks like you missed out.’

‘Please,’ Plant said, ‘can we leave that alone?’

‘I guess you’ll have to. Having missed out.’

‘Why’s he nosing around?’ Plant asked again.

‘Who knows?’

‘Do you think he could be mixed up in the warehouse fire? He didn’t answer when you asked him where he was at the time.’

‘Why would he be? What would be in it for him?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t see why he would be involved.’

‘On the other hand, I can’t see why he wouldn’t,’ Fullalove said.

Which didn’t get them very far.

‘I tell you one thing, though,’ Fullalove added.

Plant waited.

‘Go on. Tell me.’

‘Pretty clearly Bentley has to be up to something.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like trying to find out what Turner’s up to?’

‘We don’t know that Turner is up to anything.’

‘But Bentley thinks there’s something going on. So there probably is.’

‘Great,’ Plant said. ‘Just what we need.’

‘Makes it more interesting though. Not just a few books in flames.’

‘But no sign of Turner.’

‘That’s what makes it more interesting,’ Fullalove said.

Chapter 23

Aimless. That was how Plant felt. If the traffic on the roads hadn’t been so congested and the bush fire smoke so acrid and pervasive, he would probably have got into his car and driven around aimlessly. He had no obvious destination. His enquiries had produced nothing of significance. He had no idea who might have incinerated Redman’s books and as far as he could

see little prospect of ever finding out. Redman's own attempts at book burning provided no clues. He had no idea whether there was any connection between the warehouse fire and the burned books in the incinerator at the farm. He needed to talk to Turner and explain that his inquiries had got nowhere and there were no obvious leads. But Turner was not around. And Turner's absence, while not necessarily impacting on the investigation, certainly didn't accelerate or stimulate it.

Plant got into his car, nevertheless, and set off down the mean streets. He ended up at Paige Turner's for no especial reason other than the lack of anywhere else he could think of going to. And on the off chance that Turner might be there. Though Fullalove would have ascribed it to the lure of young ladies. Or to be precise, young flesh, as he would have characterized it. Plant found his suggestions and terminology distasteful. Didn't mean they weren't true, of course, Fullalove would have said and always did. There was no need to be in his immediate company to register his responses. They could be tuned into as readily and remotely as the internet. Being alone, as Plant knew well enough, did not switch off the voices in your head. The best way to exclude them was to occupy yourself by doing something else. Like visiting the Paige Turner office and engaging in actual rather than virtual conversation. Or at least trying to, with whoever was there.

It was Anya.

'Hello,' she said, 'what are you up to?'

'Not a lot,' Plant confessed.

'Really?' she said.

'Really.'

'That's good then,' she said.

Plant couldn't see how it could be.

'Because I was thinking of phoning you.'

'Really?' he said again.

It all sounded too desperately hopeful, but before he could attempt qualification or dampening down or whatever else he could have done, she cut across him.

'I don't know what to do,' she said. Plaintively. Imploringly, maybe. 'It's Geoffry. I don't know where he is. I don't know what's happened to him.'

'Why should something have happened to him?'

‘Because we haven’t heard from him. We’ve no idea where he is.’

‘Maybe he’s just having a break.’

‘But he would have told us. It isn’t like him just to vanish without saying anything. He’s never done it before.’

‘But he’s gone away before.’

‘Yes. But he always tells us. Usually he goes away for a couple of weeks or so, you know, to organize a shipment of books or whatever, and then he comes back in time to take delivery. But he never goes away without saying. He never just disappears like this without telling us where he’s going.’

‘You really think he’s disappeared? Not just gone to Asia and forgotten to tell anyone.’

‘How could he forget that?’

‘Hard to imagine, to be honest.’

‘Yes, well, let’s be honest. I can’t imagine what can have happened to him.’

‘You think something’s happened to him.’ Plant the investigator, sniffing at the trail, now long gone cold.

‘Well why hasn’t he been in touch? I mean he could be ill or something. Had a heart attack. Lost his memory. Doesn’t know who he is.’

‘That’s all a bit dramatic, isn’t it?’

‘What’s the alternative? He’s been kidnapped? Or murdered for body parts?’

‘That really does seem a bit extreme.’

‘It’s happened to people.’

‘I suppose it has,’ Plant agreed. ‘But...’

‘Why not to him?’

Why not indeed? Plant reflected and could think of no persuasive reason why not. He left it at that. Silence. And indeed it was a mystery, if you started to worry about it, which now he started to do. Though thoughts of kidnapping or murder seemed extreme. Maybe Turner just hadn’t wanted certain people to know his movements, his business. Or, to be specific, Plant reflected, he didn’t want Bentley to know. Bentley’s arrival may have been the reason for the lack of explanation. Or even for the disappearance. But he kept that to himself, not knowing how close Anya might have become to Bentley. Too close if their visit to the farm suggested anything.

‘If you’re not desperately busy...’ she said.

‘Not at all.’

‘Then maybe you could help us out.’

‘Of course.’

She smiled. Engagingly.

‘We’re in a bit of a spot with Geoffry being away and Chloe off sick.’

‘Is she all right?’

‘She’s fine. Nothing serious. Just moping.’

‘Moping?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘As in lovesick?’

‘As a matter of fact, yes, she probably is.’

‘Who’s the happy object of her affections?’

‘I’m sworn to secrecy.’

‘Thingummyjig of the confessional?’

‘Pretty much like that, as a matter of fact.’

‘That’s two matters of fact.’

‘Fact, fiction, take your pick.’

‘You sound like a true publisher.’

‘Thank you. Whatever. Anyway, the point is, we’ve got a delivery of books from India and we need to open up the shed at the farm.’

‘Why the farm?’

‘We always receive the large consignments there.’

Plant nodded.

‘Normally Geoffry goes down to the farm himself. I mean, he’s never not done it that I can remember. He gets back from Asia before the books arrive and then he goes down there himself and takes delivery.’

‘Why not here?’

‘Not enough room here, especially with a couple of cars inside. And there’s never any parking on the street round here so they need to park inside. But he’s got the storage space down

there. And he likes the excuse to get out of the office and spend some time at the farm. Then he can claim the upkeep against tax.'

'Does he need an excuse?'

'He thinks he does. Fortunately.'

'Fortunately?'

'It gets him out of the office and off our backs. Get some work done when he's not pestering you all the time.'

'Pestering?'

'You know,' she grinned.

Plant wondered, did he?

'Anyway, I can't leave the office unattended really and since you were asking me about checking out the farm as part of your enquiries, maybe you could kill the proverbial two birds with one stone and help us out and maybe go down there and take delivery. We'll pay you, of course. Your going rate. I mean, if you're frightfully busy or anything, don't worry. It was just a thought, you know. So I was going to give you a call...'

'I already checked out the farm,' Plant said. 'You were there. You gave me the wrong keys.'

'So I did,' she agreed. She laughed. Attractively. Winningly. 'Ah well, since you know where it is, that makes it easier.'

She didn't have to woo him into agreement. But he let her. He let her use maybe not the full range of her persuasive charms, but a pretty good selection of them. He gave her as much time and space as she wanted. He was happy just to sit there, in the cool of the air-conditioned office, taking it all in, what a darling he'd be if he could go there, what a terrible imposition it was to ask it, but what a splendid gesture of generosity it would be if he would do it, winning him eternal gratitude and enduring friendship, really, she hated having to do this, vamp some poor man to run errands, but in this case it wasn't so much a matter of vamping and after all, it, he, wasn't just some poor man, you know what I mean, getting in a bit deep here, anyway, it's only a day out in the country, it's not asking you to go down a mine shaft or up in a rocket.

Just country matters, was that what she meant? Probably not. Or maybe meant though not actually on offer, the strategy of the advertising industry, insinuated sexuality, but that was never what was on offer, or certainly not for sale and delivery.

‘So,’ she said, ‘since you’ve been down there, you know where it is, we thought, maybe...’

‘You want to come with me?’ he offered.

‘I’d love to, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘But I can’t leave the office unattended with Chloe off sick.’

‘I guess not.’

‘Sorry,’ she said, at her most endearing.

She did it well. No pressure. Just the winsome appeal. And really, what else did he have to do? Maybe he could nose around down there without Bentley and Anya in the background. Well, obviously he could. Whether it would produce anything useful was another issue. Face that when he came to it, or didn’t come to it. What else did he have to do?

It was detox time. Maybe that contributed to the aimlessness. Fullalove hadn’t had a smoke for days. The aim was to make it a week. The five day working week. Plant had gone along with the programme. A few days off got the body receptive again. Otherwise the more you smoked the less effect it had. Anyway, that was the theory.

So a day in the country would provide something to do for idle hands. Stop them from endlessly rolling up joints. Distract the mind.

‘I’ll be in it,’ Fullalove agreed. Uninvited.

At least they wouldn’t be inviting arrest from every Highway Patrol car and booze bus on the road.

And Fullalove might be useful to have around if there was any heavy lifting, shifting boxes of books around. And books could be heavy.

‘I’ll take the ute,’ Fullalove said. ‘I need to give it a decent run. No good for the motor just chugging around town. Save you getting any more demerit points.’

‘I don’t have any demerit points.’

‘So keep it that way, hey? And we might need to bring some boxes back.’

‘She didn’t say anything about that.’

‘Well, you can ring her and offer. Be pro-active. Helpful. Generous. All in a sultry, sexy voice.’

Plant disregarded him.

‘Utes,’ Fullalove said. ‘Did you know that they call them pick-ups in Britain. I rather like it. Surprised they’re still allowed to call them that. Could be made to sound very predatory. Of course, so could your Accent.’

‘How?’

‘Oh, honeyed accent, foreign accent, suggestive accent, salacious accent.’

‘I’ve never heard of anyone’s accent being described as salacious. Car or voice.’

‘You will, though, you will.’

Plant didn’t argue. It was all too likely.

‘Did you know that ewt was the original word for newt?’ Fullalove asked.

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘But in the end people stopped saying an ewt and started saying a newt.’

‘Is that so? Fascinating.’

‘Yes. Quite the opposite formation from adders.’

‘Really.’

‘Yes. Really. They used to be called nadders. But gradually people stopped talking about seeing a nadder and started saying they’d seen an adder.’

‘You bought an etymological dictionary in one of your job lots?’

‘I did actually. Very good. Spot on. You should think about getting work as an investigator.’

At least they had the keys this time. To the house as well as to the shed.

‘You might want to make yourself a coffee or something while you’re waiting,’ Anya had said.

Plant sat out on the veranda listening to the remorseless dove and the far more innovative butcher birds. The cicadas added their clatter, competing with the noise of a distant helicopter. But the bush fire smoke was too acrid and after coughing a few times he went inside the house and shut the doors. Fullalove fossicked around in the shed.

Instant coffee. No milk. At least the electric kettle worked and there was water. But that was it. No biscuits. No fruit. Nothing to eat. Tinned tomatoes and cannellini beans not being in the category of things he felt like eating right then. Candle sticks in case of power failure,

presumably. A couple of glass jars of rice and pasta. But for instant satisfaction, nothing. Either Turner was on a strict, depressing diet, or Anya and Bentley had cleaned the place out of anything remotely desirable. And he could have done without the word desire popping up in that context. Or in any context, for that matter.

At least there was sugar. He ladled a couple of spoonfuls into the coffee and waited for it to cool. It would have been better to have put in just one spoonful. But at least it wasn't three. No dope, no biscuits, no fruit, two sugars was the least he could do.

If it hadn't been for the smoke it would have been a pleasant day. Not too hot. The smoke enveloped everything in a light greyish blue haze which had its attractive aspect. As long as you didn't breathe it in. Or consider the destruction and devastation that generated it.

They'd set out early, aiming for six or six thirty and getting away just after seven, so that they would be there before the delivery arrived.

'You can track its progress on-line,' Anya told him.

Well, yes, you could. But tracking the truck's progress didn't tell you when it was finally going to arrive. It was a matter of waiting. So they waited. A couple of hours in all before they heard it approaching up the track, pulling up in front of the shed, and then beeping away as it backed towards the open doors.

They helped unload. It hadn't been in the original job description but there was no option. There was no fork-lift truck. They couldn't just sit around and watch the driver carry five hundred boxes. Three into five hundred was one hundred and sixty six boxes each plus one extra each for Plant and Fullalove. One box at a time, they were more than heavy enough.

Plant signed the delivery note and then the truck drove off and peace descended and comparative silence returned, the dove still cooing away, a couple of crows cawing derisively, a helicopter clattering away in the distance.

There were other boxes already in the shed. Fullalove had been nosing through them already. A stack of Turkish cookbooks, another stack of Thai recipes. Fullalove slit open the plastic tape sealing one of the new arrivals. Inside the cardboard box the books had been sealed in transparent shrink wrap, two lots of ten books each.

'Should you be ripping them open?' Plant asked, one of those questions expecting the answer 'No,' but not getting it.

'I'll seal them back up. There's tape on the bench over there.'

‘Still.’

‘Just working out how many there are,’ Fullalove said. ‘There seem to be two shrink wrapped packs per box. So twenty a box.’

‘Assuming they’re all the same book,’ Plant said, for no other reason than cussedness, questioning Fullalove’s calculations on principle. The principle of cussedness and a certain irritated resentment at having been conned into carrying one hundred and sixty seven boxes of Indian cookbooks in the heat of the day.

‘Good point,’ Fullalove agreed, unperturbed. ‘I’ll check.’

He slit open the tops of another couple of boxes. It wasn’t what Plant had meant.

‘I really wouldn’t do that,’ Plant said.

‘Why not?’

‘I just wouldn’t open any more up.’

‘Just following your suggestion.’

‘What suggestion?’

‘That they might be different books.’

‘Well, they’re not, you can see that. They’re the same.’

They stood beside the open boxes, looking down at the covers inside the transparent shrink wrap.

‘Actually,’ Fullalove said, ‘they’re not all the same.’

‘Yes they are.’

‘No they’re not. Look.’

Plant looked.

‘They’re the same.’

Full colour dust jackets portraying multiple dishes of enticing food.

‘No, they’re not. Look down at the bottom of the cover. See. That one has Paige Turner with the Indian publisher underneath. This one just has the name of the Indian publisher, no Paige Turner.’

‘So what?’ Plant asked. ‘They’re the same book. It’s the same cover art.’

‘Let’s have a look,’ Fullalove said, slitting the shrink wrapping and taking out first the one book and then the the other book and opening them up.

‘Same contents,’ Plant said.

Fullalove was examining them more closely, flicking through the pages, lifting off the dust jacket.

‘Check this,’ he said.

He’d taken off the dust jackets to reveal the bindings. One of them was of some shiny, smooth substance, plasticized brown cloth or board, the other looked more like leather, or imitation leather.

‘Triparoo,’ Fullalove rejoiced, pressing his thumb nail into the imitation leather and leaving an incision. ‘So this is what Turner was up to. Should’ve guessed. All that Asian connection. No wonder he didn’t want the police called in about the fire.’

‘What?’ Plant asked.

‘You don’t know what this is?’

‘Some plastic resin or something.’

‘Resin, yes. Plastic no, forget plastic. This is way beyond *Leaves of Grass*. This is *Covers of Cannabis*. This is pure, bloody hashish.’

‘Hashish?’

‘Sure bloody is.’

‘How do you know?’

‘What else would it be?’

‘No idea. Lots of things.’

‘Only one way to tell. Break a bit off and cook it up with some coffee.’

‘Don’t,’ Plant said. ‘Don’t touch it. If it’s what you say it is, then breaking a chunk off...’

‘Not a chunk, just a fragment.’

‘... could get us in deep shit with whoever’s bringing it in. Best we know nothing about it.’

‘Best if I souvenir half a dozen books,’ Fullalove said.

‘Don’t even think of it. Just put the books back in the boxes and seal them up.’

‘I can’t seal the shrink wrap.’

‘Well put the ones you’ve opened down at the bottom and put the unopened ones on top. And then seal the boxes up and put the ones you’ve opened at the bottom of the stack and hope no one notices.’

‘I want to know how many there are.’

‘Five hundred. We carried them.’

‘No, how many are bound in hashish.’

‘Don’t go messing around with them, for heaven’s sake. I’m serious. Leave them alone, you don’t want anyone to know you know about it.’

‘It could be half the consignment.’

‘No.’

‘It could be.’

‘It could be but it’s none of our business. Leave them alone and let’s get out of here.’

‘I’ve heard people talk about it,’ Fullalove said. ‘As an idea. Learning bookbinding in gaol and then putting it into practice. But I’ve never seen it actually done. Brilliant. Preserving the old craft traditions. Fine bindings. Marvellous they’re still doing it. All credit to Turner. Bound in finest Morocco.’

‘They’ve come from India.’

‘No need to be pedantic about it. In the book trade it’s generically Morocco, wherever it comes from.’

‘Really?’

‘I don’t know. But what a great idea. Books. It all looks totally legit. Not even hollowed out books. Open them up and they’re real books. And the only give-away is that missing imprint. You wouldn’t notice that unless you were looking for it. And it’s brilliant. Turner can just say, they’re not mine, they don’t have my imprint, these are mine with my imprint on them. The others must have got shipped by mistake. It’s some racket the Indians are into. Nothing to do with me.

‘He gets his five thousand copies printed with the joint imprint on the dust jacket and title page and verso. All totally above board. Then he orders another batch of the original Indian edition, no shared imprint on the title page or dust jacket. He rips the bindings off them, rebinds them with hashish, puts their dust jackets back on. You’d never notice unless you took the dust jackets off and why would you do that? And you probably wouldn’t notice even if you did. Just looks like leather or imitation leather binding. Then he seals them up in shrink wrap. Stops people from looking at them up close and seals up any give-away odour. Then he boxes them up, and mixes the boxes in with the five thousand with his imprint on them and sends them off together. Brilliant. When they arrive here he rips off the jackets with only the Indian imprint on

them, removes the hashish binding, and then burns the jackets and the pages of the books in the incinerator. That's why there were little bits of burnt pages in the ashes. I figured there had to be some dodgy reason.'

'And now you know.'

'Brilliant,' Fullalove said, nodding his head in approval.

'Brilliant,' Fullalove said yet once more. 'This explains the cookbooks. Do cookbooks sell any more? Don't people just look up recipes on the internet? Which is a recipe for disaster, of course.'

'Why?' Plant asked.

'Because then the spooks can hack into your system and work out what you eat, what ingredients you use, they know your tastes, how to tempt you, how to feed you something that interacts with what you've eaten ...'

'Oh, really,' Plant said. Exasperated.

'O.K., O.K., but that's the principle of the thing.'

And it probably was, Plant reflected.

'So no one buys cookbooks any more, do they, more fools them. Maybe I should start stocking them after all. There'd be a market there. People who don't want to get poisoned.'

Plant groaned.

'Anyway, at the moment there's a declining market for cookbooks because of the internet. So that's why he does these small print runs. It doesn't make economic sense, going over to India or Thailand or wherever all the time, not when you're only printing five or six thousand. But when you bind another five thousand with hashish, then it makes perfect sense.

'So that's why Turner's always going over there. He's probably over there now, that's why he's not around. You're dealing drugs, you've got to be there at every stage of the operation. You can't delegate. You can't trust anyone in that business. You've got to check it out from the beginning, make sure you're getting the full amount you paid for, check out every packaged bit, make sure they haven't substituted something and ripped you off. That's just taking delivery at that end. And you can't just drive up to a warehouse and load it into your hire car. Or truck. You've got to do the handover somewhere safe, somewhere remote but not so remote that it's not safe. This is after you've already had to meet earlier to haggle over the price,

and that's going to take time and your personal involvement. Can't trust anyone else to do it, they could be taking kick-backs which will have pushed up the price you have to pay.

'Then you've got to pack it. However you plan to conceal it, you've got a whole time-consuming and laborious operation there, hiding it, trying to insulate it so there's no smell, figuring out ways it won't show up on an x-ray at customs, and even if you've got all that worked out in advance it's still going to take time to do in a thorough way and it's got to be thorough so you've got to do it yourself or at least supervise it yourself, otherwise you lose the lot along with your liberty.

'And then you've got to deliver it to the freight company or airline or cargo ship or whatever way it's going to be transported, and you need to be there personally to make sure none of it goes astray, to make sure it's all safely dispatched. You can't afford not to be there at any stage. And that all takes time however much you've got it planned and rehearsed and practised and the rest of it, it all takes time and you've got to be there. Then you fly back clean, not carrying anything. But if you're doing this regularly, you've got to be flying overseas regularly and staying a while, so what's your cover story going to be? Sex tourism? You've got to have some legitimate or seemingly legitimate business. You don't say you're a writer researching a travel book, that way they assume you're a spy and you get put under surveillance. So you've got to have some persuasive business cover. Importing peanuts. Selling software. The silk trade. Buying antiques, though that can be tricky. What are you going to come up with? How about publishing? Buying and selling rights. Getting books printed. What do you reckon? Got a better idea? And you can launder the profits through the legitimate business, which being a publisher would probably have been losing money hand over fist, without some regular cash injection like this. Explains his publishing policy.'

'How?'

'He didn't have one. It didn't matter. Any old books would do. It was the dope that was making the money. The only thing that kept the business afloat, probably.

'Brilliant,' he concluded.

'I might take a couple of boxes back with me,' Fullalove said.

'You can't do that.'

‘Why not? I’ll pay for them. What’s it matter to Turner who he sells them to? It’s all money. Get some decent authentic organic natural hashish.’

‘How do you know it’s organic?’

Fullalove shrugged.

‘It has to be better than that hydroponic weed I’ve been getting.’

‘Maybe. But just leave it alone. We don’t want to get mixed up in this.’

‘You mightn’t.’

‘It’s asking for trouble. Heavy trouble. Who knows what taking a couple of boxes would unleash.’

‘The hounds of Hell,’ Fullalove suggested. ‘You worry too much. It’s not a problem.’

‘It is. You don’t know who’s involved in this. You don’t know who Turner’s bringing it in for. They could be heavy duty crims. Steal a couple of boxes and they’ll come after you. You’ll end up dead.’

‘You’re over-reacting.’

‘No I’m not. I’m deadly serious. You want to buy some, wait till Turner comes back. Make him an offer. And leave me out of it.’

‘Just one box,’ Fullalove said.

‘No way.’

Fullalove shook his head sadly, wearily.

‘What a wasted opportunity.’

‘For what? A violent death?’

‘Just a decent smoke.’

And then there was the sound of vehicles hurtling up the track and coming to a noisy stop outside the shed and an amplified voice calling ‘Police’ and ‘Come out with your hands above your head’ and ‘Police’ and ‘Come out now.’ And above it all the clatter of a helicopter hovering above.

‘Oh no,’ Fullalove said.

‘Now!’ the amplified voice called. ‘Hands up. Outside now.’

They emerged through the open doors to find themselves confronted by what seemed like a dozen or more helmeted and visored and booted robotic creatures in non-reflective combat

gear, body armour beneath it presumably, weapons in hand. Whether they were brandishing their weapons like swords and batons or aiming them like bows and guns Plant could never afterwards determine unambiguously. In memory it seemed to be both. It was the stuff of movies and television. Action drama. Deeds not words. It was beyond Plant's words, anyway.

'Down. Down. Kneel. Down. Face down. Hands behind back.' Iterated how many times it was hard to tell amidst the shock and noise of it. They lay face down, hands behind back, inert, as their ankles and wrists were shackled or handcuffed or whatever, impossible to see behind your back.

It was a long night of interrogation.

Plant offered his card. Research assistance. Investigative reporting.

'And what does that mean?'

'I do research jobs. For publishers.'

'Oh, yes.'

Plant wasn't sure whether it sounded convincing or not.

'And what were you researching in that shed?'

'I was just helping out, actually.'

'Oh yes. Helping out what, actually?'

'I'd called in at the office.'

'What office?'

'Paige Turner's office in Sydney. The publishers. And they needed someone to open up the shed for a delivery.'

'Who was they?'

'Well, not exactly they.'

'Not exactly they.'

'There was only one person there. The other was off sick. And Turner himself was away. And they had a delivery of books due and no-one to open up the shed to let them in. So ...'

'So...?'

'So she asked would I go up there.'

'Who's she.'

'Anya. The person in the office.'

‘And?’

‘So I did.’

‘And?’

‘So the truck came and we opened up the shed and took the delivery.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of books.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘How about a consignment of a prohibited substance?’

‘What prohibited substance?’

‘You tell us.’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘We’ve been tracking this consignment since it set out from India. Are you trying to tell us you don’t know what’s in it?’

‘Books. Cookbooks.’

‘And you’re trying to tell us you don’t know what else?’

‘No.’

‘You do know?’

‘Yes. No. I mean, yes, I’m trying to tell you that no, I don’t know.’

‘And that’s the best you can come up with?’

‘I’m not coming up with anything. I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’

There was no sign of any lie-detector around. Not that Plant knew what a lie-detector looked like any more. Or ever had looked like. But there was no obvious equipment beyond the video recording device they were using.

The questioning continued. It looked bad, Plant would have been the first to agree. And totally unconvincing. Why would anyone believe he was just up at the farm out of the goodness of his heart, or his sad susceptibility to Anya’s charms, and didn’t know anything about any hashish? It was utterly unconvincing to Plant. Even though he’d known nothing about the

hashish until Fullalove found it. And best say nothing about that. And pray that Fullalove said nothing either.

Apart from the lying face down and being trussed and shackled like chickens ready for the poultry processing plant, there was no physical violence. They were not subjected to any enhanced interrogation techniques on the American model. No water-boarding. No one slapped them about. Or let the dogs loose onto them. Though in registering that absence, the possibilities were all too vividly at hand. Plant delved into the deepest recesses of his politeness, cooperation, non-aggression. And prayed again that Fullalove would do the same. Refrain from any acid asides. Or cynical so whats.

The Toyota ute was the problem. If they'd come in Plant's low key Hyundai they might have aroused less suspicion. But an empty ute seemed to be crying out to be loaded up with boxes of hashish bound books.

'A bookseller,' Fullalove told them. Identified himself as. Rather than redundant freelance journalist. Or independent conspiracy theorist.

'Oh yes. What sort of books?'

'Any sort.'

'Dirty ones?'

'No, I only deal in clean copies. Second hand, but in good nick.'

'Don't play the smart arse with us or you'll find yourself in a really good nick. You know what we mean.'

'Just books. Nothing illegal.'

'And you were picking up just books today.'

'No. I don't deal in new books. I'm a second-hand dealer.'

'You've got a licence?'

'I only sell books. I'm not into antiques and stuff.'

'And drugs.'

'I don't have anything to do with drugs.'

And after four days without a smoke hopefully nothing would register on any saliva test or blood test they might force on him. Not that a fatty tissue sample might not give him away, THC lodging there for months, years. But hopefully they wouldn't consider doing a biopsy.

'So what were you doing up there?'

‘Just a day in the country. Seeing the sights. Keeping my old mate company.’

‘Oh yes?’

Fullalove smiled in polite agreement, but stopped himself from saying anything, witty or otherwise.

Needless to say the police refused to believe that Plant and Fullalove were not involved in importing the hashish. They were there, the hashish was there, what was the obvious conclusion? They were held as long as they could be. The threat of being held under the prevention of terrorism legislation and locked up for twenty-eight days or however long the law allowed was held over them. For financially supporting a terrorist organisation. What terrorist organisation? Whoever supplied the drugs. The police’s reasoning was not unlike Fullalove’s conspiracy theories. Join the dots.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I can see why you’d think that, but the truth is we have no knowledge let alone any contact with drug dealers or terrorist organisations. You can check us out.’

‘We will.’

‘It’s not me who has these contacts. I just came along for the ride.’

‘In your ute.’

‘Yes.’

‘Who was driving it?’

‘I was.’

‘So what do you mean, you just came along for the ride.’

‘A figure of speech. A day in the country.’

‘And why a ute?’

‘It’s what I drive. I’m a bookseller. I pick up boxes of books.’

‘And that’s what you were doing today.’

‘No. No, I deal in second-hand books. Single copies. I don’t buy in bulk. Not new books. I couldn’t handle them, that’s not my market.’

‘Forget the books. It’s the hashish we’re talking about.’

‘What hashish? Nothing to do with me. I don’t know anything about it.’

Nonetheless they went over the ute meticulously. No boxes of books in the back. No hidden stash in the glove box. No roaches in the ashtray, nothing but a few coins, small change

for parking meters. Fullalove had for years made a point of swallowing the roaches. And of always rolling joints in his hovel before setting out, never rolling them in the ute and spilling leaves and heads onto the floor and down the back of the seats.

In the end it was Turner's absence, now a disappearance, that got Plant and Fullalove off the hook. They remained persons of interest, instructed not to attempt to leave the country, but there was nothing specific to pin on them, and everything to pin on the missing Turner. A warrant had been issued for his arrest. Without much likelihood of its being enacted in the near future, if ever. Turner presumably would create a new identity and a new life somewhere where there were no annoying extradition treaties. Unless, of course, he hadn't been tipped off about the impending interception. Unless, and it was not an impossibility, he was already dead.

It had been an episode that Plant preferred to repress and forget. Not unique in that regard, though soliciting repression more than most. Fullalove, however, was happy to have observed police procedure in close detail.

'You can never have too much information,' he claimed, not being a writer or an historian swamped by data. An insight into investigation practices more than compensated for the inconvenience of detainment and the threat of arrest. Even the threats had their satisfactory aspect, demonstration of the daily practice of a modern democracy. Plant could hear it echoing down the corridors of the future. 'When I was, when I was, when I was arrested, charged, released, exonerated, warned, threatened, the rest of it. The personal note that fleshed out Fullalove's projections of paranoia, what it was like, when I was, when I was...

Apart from that, Fullalove's mood was like the respectful sadness of a bereavement.

'Tragic, really,' he lamented. 'Tragic, such a neat little operation like that, you got your books, you got your hash, it was ideal. A public service in any civilized society. A bleeding outrage to have to shut it down. Turner was doing a positive public service. An independent publishing voice and dope. It's legalised in lots of states in America. But no place for someone like him in our soft fascism. People don't realize the full evil of our society.'

'Write a book about it,' Plant said.

'And who would publish it? Paige Turner was probably the last outfit that would have taken it. And see what happened when they published Redman's book.'

Plant nodded in some sort of agreement.

‘Not that there’s much to see yet, is there? You still haven’t worked out who set fire to that, have you?’

Plant shook his head.

Chapter 24

At first Fullalove had dismissed the media coverage of the bush fires as corporate pandering to governmental intimidation tactics. Keep the population in a state of anxiety, make them fearful and make them spend to distract and cushion themselves. But as the fires grew and spread he began to see it more as an Armageddon, an Apocalypse, signs of the longed for destruction of the existing world order, intimations of change. It was enough to keep him, if not glued to the television, at least to have the fire coverage running as a continuous background to his musings, available for spot checks and updates throughout the day.

‘Hey!’ he called out to Plant. ‘That’s where we were.’

‘Where is?’

‘There, Now. Look. That’s where we were, that’s Turner’s property down where that fire front is, don’t your recognize it?’

The television showed roaring flames soaring up the great stands of gum trees and burning out their canopies, embers rising through the air, driven by the heat and force of the flames. Then it switched to the burnt out, desolate aftermath, scorched and fallen tree trunks, blackened, smouldering turf, strands of twisted wire hanging from broken fences.

‘That’s the road we went down, that’s Turner’s place. Or was. Listen.’

Twelve properties had been destroyed, the reporter said. No loss of life. Not human life. Livestock was another matter. Cattle. Horses. Goats. As well as kangaroos, wallabies, koalas. Let alone bugs and beetles. The speed and spread of the fire was overwhelming. A change of wind direction, flying embers, and suddenly a whole new front had developed before anything could be done to save the properties.

‘Are you sure that was Turner’s place?’

‘That was his gate, remember? With that old milk churn. See the track. Didn’t you recognize it?’

Plant recognized it.

‘We were lucky we went up there when we did,’ he said. ‘I didn’t think that the fires were that close.’

‘They probably weren’t. The police probably torched the place.’

‘The police torched the place? Why would they do that?’

‘To steal the dope and make it look like it would have got destroyed in the fire. You’d probably find they helped extend the bushfire front, if you looked into it.’

Plant had no intention of looking into it. Not that.

‘Maybe I should call the office.’ he said. ‘See if they’ve heard anything.’

‘I wouldn’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because the police will be listening in to see who’s phoning up in a panic about all that dope.’

‘Oh no,’ Plant said. ‘The dope. I hadn’t thought of that. What a waste. Maybe we should go down there and breathe in deeply.’

‘No way.’

‘Really? That’s not like you to pass up a free contact-high. The air would be thick with hashish. Passive smoking. Imagine it.’

‘No way,’ Fullalove said again. ‘Don’t be naive. Like I already said, the cops would’ve removed it all before they torched the place.’

‘You’re really saying that the cops started the fire.’

‘Well, I would’ve if I’d been them.’ Fullalove said. ‘We stuffed up their surveillance operation. They were waiting for whoever was due to pick up the dope and they got us instead. So what with all the carry on of their rabid-response teams and the helicopter and the rest of it, whoever was due to pick it up would’ve had a pretty clear warning to stay away. Unless of course they’d already been tipped off, like Turner seems to have been, so they never planned to turn up anyway.

‘And the cops would have figured that out soon enough. So they’d take the dope and then torch the place to make it look like the dope all got burned up in a bush fire. They’d got the fire front approaching all around, why not help it along a bit? Saves going through all the legal

processes of trying to confiscate the farm as the proceeds of crime. Easiest just to burn it down. And recycle the dope.'

'You really think so?'

'Well you'd hope so, wouldn't you. A terrible waste otherwise. It would be a tragedy if it all got burned. They wouldn't have let that happen. You've got to give them some credit.'

'So you reckon they got it?'

'I don't see why not. Then they'd sell it on, like they always do,' Fullalove continued, 'like they always do when they raid a marijuana plantation. They always claim they seize the plants and burn them. They show you them seizing them on the news. But how often do they show them actually being burned? Then they put it out on the market. Apart from what they put aside for personal use. They can always claim they put it out on the market to track down who's buying it. Bullshit. They know who's buying it. The dealers who they supply.'

'Maybe you should've souvenired a couple of boxes after all.'

'Of course I should've. I told you so at the time.'

'Except that the cops would've found them in the back of your ute.'

'Maybe.'

'For sure.'

'Yeah, well, I didn't.'

'So you reckon it wasn't flying embers or a change of wind that wiped out Turner's farm.'

'Of course not. Arson, pure and simple. And professional.'

'Like Redman's books.'

Fullalove scratched the bristles on his chin reflectively.

'Not really. That was totally unprofessional. That was a pissy little fire. This destroyed the whole property from the look of it.'

'So not the same arsonist.'

'No. Why would the cops have cared about Redman's book, anyway? And they'd have done a better job if it had been them. So no.'

'I still think I should get in touch with the office. If anyone's there. See if they've heard anything more.'

‘Suit yourself. What’s more to know? You can rest assured the cops souvenired the hashish before the place burned down. And don’t let anyone tell you any different. Unless it’s the cops, of course. Best not to disagree with them.’

Chapter 25

‘Phone the office,’ Plant had said to the police when they questioned him. Not just a suggestion, almost a plea. They did more than that. They sent in a team and searched the premises and grilled Anya and Chloe.

Anya told him the details when he went round there. He assumed the phone and email would be – and probably had been for a long time – monitored. Recorded anyway, if not actually listened to in real time. As for there being a police presence there, or hidden across the road or wherever, he rather doubted it. He went round there, anyway.

Anya was on her own.

‘Still no word from Turner?’

She shook her head.

‘But the police didn’t close you down.’

She shook her head again. Maybe she was beyond words.

‘I wasn’t sure there’d be anyone in here.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said.

‘So who’s running the show while Turner’s away?’

She picked up a book from her desk and held it up for Plant to see. It was one of Bentley’s novels.

‘Not the crooked Chinaman?’

She nodded.

‘What’s he got to do with it?’ he asked.

‘He’s going to take over,’ she said.

‘Take over what?’

‘Paige Turner.

‘He didn’t waste much time.’

‘No,’ she agreed. ‘He said if it was going to be done it was best done quickly. So he phoned round the backers as soon as he heard about the police raid.’

‘And?’

‘He offered to buy them out. They didn’t want all that bad press about drug smuggling. They weren’t involved in it. Total embarrassment. So they were happy to bail out of the company.’

‘So who were they? I know his wife had money in it.’

‘I don’t know. Just investors.’

‘And Bentley just happened to have the ready cash?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said again, all ignorance is bliss. ‘I think he represents someone or other. Some company that doesn’t want its name known till the deal’s done, from what he said.’

‘So business as usual.’

‘Oh, well, more or less. Oh, and forget about finding out who burned Adam Redman’s book, he said to tell you. He said it’s the least of his worries, just put in your final account and call it a day.’

She smiled, enigmatically.

Plant smiled back, no less enigmatically.

‘Well, well, well,’ Fullalove said.

‘Yes, indeed.’

Fullalove pondered on it. The news. Picked his nose. Cleared his throat. Scratched his ear.

‘Lucky Bentley just happened to be out here when Turner disappeared.’

‘Convenient,’ Plant agreed.

‘So what are the possibilities?’

‘Go on, you tell me.’

Fullalove itemized them, counting them off on his thumb and fingers.

‘First, Bentley has his sources, hears that Turner is about to go down, so tips him off. Maybe that’s why he came out here. Had to tip him off in person since all the phone and email communications would be monitored. So he uses that idiotic festival as cover, promoting his new book. And Turner disappears.

‘Alternatively, Bentley has his sources, hears what Turner’s up to in the fine binding business and dobs him in.

‘And, third option, Bentley tips Turner off and dobs him in.’

‘Why would he do both?’

‘It knocks Turner off the board and gives Bentley the opportunity to grab the business.’

‘So he comes out here to be in position to take over the operation when Turner disappears.’

‘Exac’ly. But does that mean he’s in cahoots with Turner and keeping the business going? Or does it mean he got Turner to run so he can take over the business?’

‘How would he be in cahoots with Turner?’

‘Because they could both of them be fronting for some other outfit.’

‘Like what, some predatory, global media business?’

‘No, the days of corporate takeovers are over,’ Fullalove pronounced. ‘We’re into the next phase of global capitalism. Contraction not expansion. Divestment not acquisitions. No one wants to buy up publishers. Why would you bother?’

‘So who, then?’

‘Some SAS or SIS racket, some military or security operation, usually. They’d be in the best position to source drugs. And get them into the country. Turner and Bentley, they’re just officer-class middle-management. It’s too cosy, Bentley taking over like that. You’ll probably find the ultimate management stays the same. But who knows, or if they had any sense, who would want to know? Such are the mysteries of our times whose answers we shall never know.’

‘That doesn’t sound like you. I thought you knew everything.’

‘I know enough not to want to know any more about this business if that’s who might be involved. Though that still leaves room for informed speculations. And my speculations confirm that this is something best left alone.’

‘That’s your considered advice.’

‘Could be your safest option,’ Fullalove said.

‘It doesn’t look like that big enough operation to me,’ Plant objected.

‘True. Maybe Turner was going it alone and Bentley heard about it and dobbed him in or did a deal, let Turner get away and then moved in. But who knows?’

‘Who indeed?’

‘And Turner didn’t bring the police in about the warehouse fire because he didn’t want them looking into his business. But he was worried that whoever started it might create a situation where the police did get involved. So he called you in.’

‘Sounds right.’

‘But you still haven’t found out who started the fire.’

‘I’m off the fire investigation now.’

‘And you still haven’t found out who did it.’

‘No.’

‘I think we can disregard the theory that the fire was the warning signal for Turner to cut and run.’

‘Never even considered it.’

‘Pity, though. It would have made it neater,’ Fullalove reflected. ‘And now you’re off the case, you’ll never find out, will you?’

‘We’ll see.’

Fullalove gave his laugh, the one like a derisory crow.

‘Well, there you are then. Bentley obviously doesn’t want you nosing around. So, personally, I’d take that as a sign to stay well away.’

Chapter 26

Plant drove through the smoke haze to Paige Turner’s. Deliver his final invoice in person and take one last look round. Chloe was at her desk, all redheaded and rosy-cheeked, glowing like a naked flame to any unwary moth.

Plant resolved on the banal.

‘Still here,’ he said.

She smiled up at him.

‘What about the rest of the staff?’

‘Anya’s out somewhere. The editors and designers all work from home. They’re just contracted for a job at a time, when we need them.’

‘And are there any more jobs?’

‘Just a couple finishing off. But not any new ones, no. Not till some decisions are made about what to put into production. There’s work waiting to go.’

‘But not in progress.’

‘Not really.’

He tried offering information instead of attempting to elicit it.

‘You’ve heard that the farm burned down?’ he asked.

‘I know. It’s terrible. It’s nothing to do with me. I didn’t do that,’ she said in a flurry of confusion.

‘Do what?’

‘Burn it down. It wasn’t me. I’ve been here all the time.’

He looked across the desk at her but she was bent over, holding her face in her hands, nothing for him to focus on but that red head.

‘Nothing to do with me,’ she sobbed.

‘I didn’t imagine it was.’

There was no reason to think that she had had anything to do with the farm fire, she was in Sydney when it happened, how could she have been involved? It was not logic that was ruling her responses, he realized, but some troubled emotion.

‘I didn’t do it, really, not the farm, I wouldn’t ever do anything like that, it’s nothing to do with me, I never wanted to burn anything down, just get rid of those stupid books, they were a ticking time bomb.’

What books? Plant wondered, the hashish bound cookbooks? Was she talking about destroying evidence? Yet she said she didn’t start the farm fire.

‘What books?’ he asked.

‘Adam’s, of course,’ she said, looking up to answer him, tears streaming down her cheeks. ‘They would have ruined him for ever. He’d finally got this chance, he was in for this job, and he would have got it. He’d been struggling for years, just getting casual work. But he’d got this chance at last, he told me. A really good job. But if that book had come out it would have ruined him, they wouldn’t have given him the job, you saw what that dreadful *Dark Side* did to him when they got hold of a copy, I just wanted to stop that from happening, I didn’t want to burn anything down, I just wanted to get rid of the books before anyone heard about it and read it.’

‘But Redman had copies.’

‘I couldn’t not give him his author’s copies, could I? That would have destroyed him, he’d put so much work into it. It was only fair. So I phoned him to come and pick up his author’s copies as soon as the books arrived. And then I set fire to the rest of them before we started to send out the review copies and advance orders.’

‘It probably wouldn’t have got reviewed anyway,’ Plant said, Fullalove’s theories on suppression in the media in mind.

‘Of course it would,’ she said. Angrily. ‘You saw what the *Dark Side* did to him.’

True enough, Plant reflected. But there again Redman wouldn’t have gone to the *Dark Side* if the books hadn’t been burned.

‘It would have been on his application for the job, though, wouldn’t it?’ he said. ‘On his CV.’

‘Of course. But people only ever just look at the CV. They never bother to read the stuff listed. They like to know the candidate’s published a book, but they never read it. But if it got bad reviews, which it would have, then they’d get to know about it and find out what he’d been saying. And he’d be out of a job again.’

‘So why did you do it?’

‘I just told you,’ she said.

‘You burned his books because you disapproved of his views.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Yes.’

‘So which?’

‘I didn’t agree with him but that’s not why I burned the books. I was trying to save him from being attacked by the sort of people who’d really feel like burning his books if they read it. If they’d read it he’d never had any hope of getting that job. Or any other. Ever again.’

‘Well, he certainly doesn’t now.’

‘I know, I know, it was a disaster, I’m sorry.’

She did the tearful number again.

‘Maybe Bentley will reprint it.’

‘No!’ she pretty well shrieked. ‘No, that would be a disaster. And it’s not going to happen. He made that clear.’

‘Why not?’

‘What does it matter why not?’ she asked.

Quite a lot, Plant thought. Was it a matter of Bentley deciding it was best not to antagonise *The Dark Side* by reprinting *Illiberal Liberals*? Or did he see Redman as one of those scruffy dissidents remorselessly hunted down in his novels? Destined for suppression. A suitable target for mopping up? But Chloe refused to speculate, just shook her red head from side to side till Plant stopped questioning her. He tried another approach.

‘How come you got involved? Did you have a scene going with him?’

She looked him in the eyes and then away again.

‘You never told me you and Redman were an item.’

‘We were hardly an item, as you put it,’ she said, trying for some chill dignity amidst her snuffles and tears. ‘Geoffry didn’t like us getting involved with his authors.’

‘But you were.’

‘Not that involved. I mean, not for that long. I just...’ She snuffled again. ‘I felt sorry for him and...’

‘But you were involved enough to worry about him if the book got attacked.’

‘It would have. It would have got torn to pieces. They’d have slaughtered him.’

She burst into tears.

‘How am I ever going to tell him it was me that did it? How will he ever understand?’

Hard to imagine, Plant reflected.

‘What’s going to happen to me? she wailed.

‘Nothing much,’ Plant assured her.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, nothing at all. Why should it? Who am I going to tell? Turner’s disappeared and I doubt he’ll be coming back in a hurry. I can’t report to him. And Bentley’s closed down the investigation, so I’m not getting paid, so there’s no reason for me to say anything to him. Let alone to anyone else. It was never a matter for the police, they never got notified. Or the insurance. So the only person who might care is Adam Redman.’

Chloe went into meltdown again.

‘How can I ever tell him? I can’t. He’d kill me.’

‘Probably not.’

‘He’ll never forgive me,’ she said. ‘He’ll never understand. And I’m terrified of him now.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘After he set fire to all those feminists.’

‘Just their books,’ Plant said.

‘It wasn’t just their books. It was their souls.’

‘Their souls?’

‘“A good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit,”’ she quoted.

‘Are you still allowed to say master spirit?’ Plant asked.

‘Don’t be glib,’ she snapped at him. She burst into tears again. ‘Now I’ve messed up everything and Adam’s got no books and he’ll never get a job again after burning those feminists and I can’t bear to be with him after he did that, all that rage, I can never forgive him for doing something like that.’

‘But you did the same,’ Plant said. ‘You burned his books.’

‘I know, I know, it’s terrible, he’ll never forgive me either, I know.’

She stopped to draw breath.

‘Oh I feel so all alone,’ she sobbed.

Great heavy sobs. Like her own activated sprinkler system, Plant told himself. Keep it cynical. Keep it ridiculous. Keep it anything but keep out of the trap. He could see it opening there as he circled round it. It didn’t seem like a lethal mantrap of the old gamekeeper and poacher days. But certainly it was a trap for the male of the species. His species, anyway. Not exactly a honey trap. Or maybe it was.

‘Let’s go and get a drink,’ he offered, a contemporary Sir Galahad, can’t do better than that. Let’s go and get two drinks, perhaps.

She turned and smiled up at him.

‘I think I’d rather have one of those funny cigarettes Anya said you and Fullalove were smoking up at the farm. If that’s all right with you. She said Bentley reckoned that that’s what could have started the fire that burned the place down, someone tossing a roach onto the grass without stubbing it out properly. Do you think? I won’t tell anyone, anyway.’

A chill ran over Plant, seizing his entire body. And then relief.

‘We weren’t smoking that day,’ he said.

‘Really?’

A somewhat sceptical ‘really?’

‘We were in detox.’

‘Both of you?’

‘That’s how you do it. Mutual support.’

‘How convenient,’ she said. ‘Ah well, it must have been the previous time.’

Plant gave a shrug.

‘So,’ she said. ‘You’re not still in detox, are you?’

‘No.’

‘That’s good, then.’

She waited expectantly.

‘We can still go and get a drink later.’

He nodded agreement and extricated a ready-rolled joint from his jacket pocket. Contingency planning.

‘Do you need a light?’ Chloe asked, opening a drawer of her desk and taking out a box of matches.

‘I’ve got some here,’ Plant said, fumbling through his pockets again and bringing out his own.

Same brand.

Redheads.

She smiled across at him.

The redhead.

Strike a light! as the old phrase went.

He struck a light.

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